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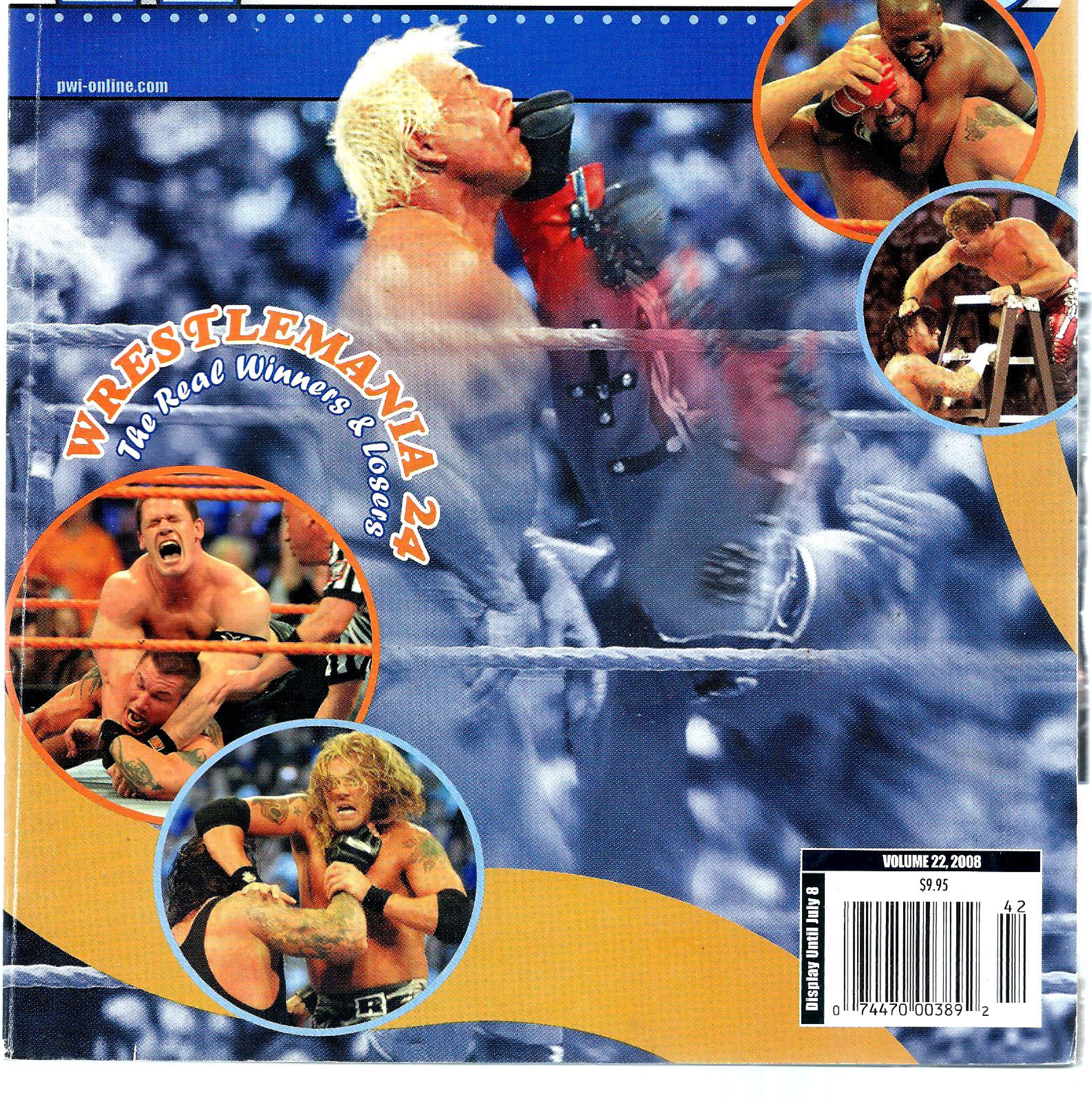

WRESTLEMANIA 24

The Real Winners & Losers

VOLUME 22, 2008
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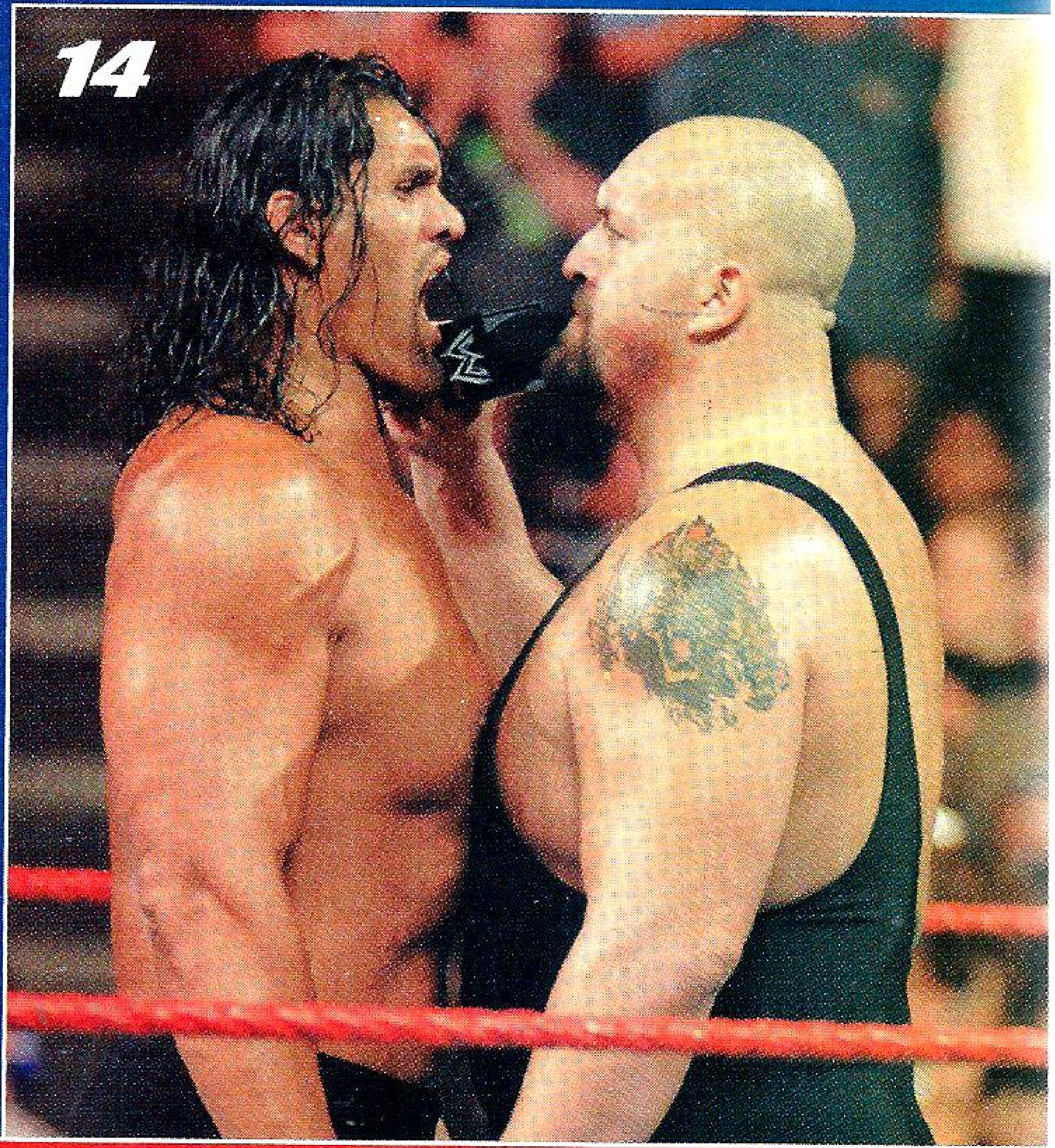
inside wrestling

THE MAGAZINE THAT RIPS THE LID OFF PRO WRESTLING



DEPARTMENTS

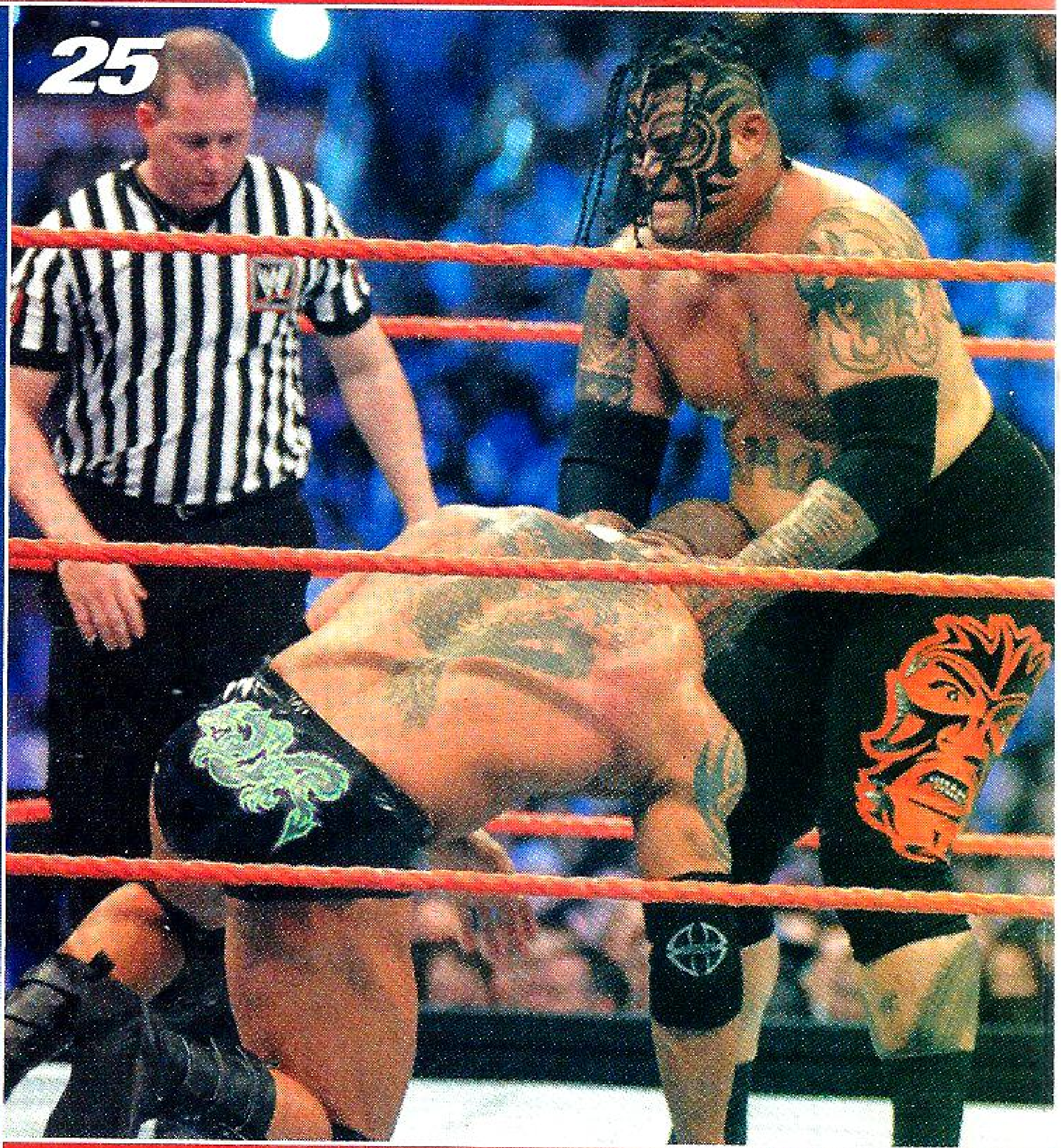
4 SINCERELY YOURS
6 NAMES MAKIN' NEWS by Harry Burkett
12 DATA SHEET: CODY RHODES
13 DATA SHEET: HERNANDEZ
14 ON THE ROAD with Dave Lenker
16 THE INSIDER by Brandi Mankiewicz
18 CAPSULE PROFILE #341: CHAVO GUERRERO
20 WHATEVER HAPPENED TO ... GENE KINISKI? by Mike Lano
22 PLAIN SPEAKING with Matt Brock
48 WRESTLING'S GREATEST PHOTOS
60 EDITORS' ROUNDTABLE
64 WRESTLING TIMELINE: TEAM 3D
72 ROLL CALL OF CHAMPIONS
74 CHECK OUT THIS SHOT!

FEATURES

25 **WRESTLEMANIA 24: THE REAL WINNERS AND LOSERS**
We tell you who really won—and lost—the most from this year's grand event

44 **WHY THE FANS WON'T HONOR NIGEL MCGUINNESS**
Winning the ROH title seemed like the most honorable win of Nigel McGuinness' career, but his respectful fans quickly changed their tune when McGuinness started begging off title defenses due to injuries

56 **HOTSEAT: GAIL KIM**
"I'll never get to a point where I've accomplished enough to be content"



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sincerely yours

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Sincerely Yours
P.O. Box 1148
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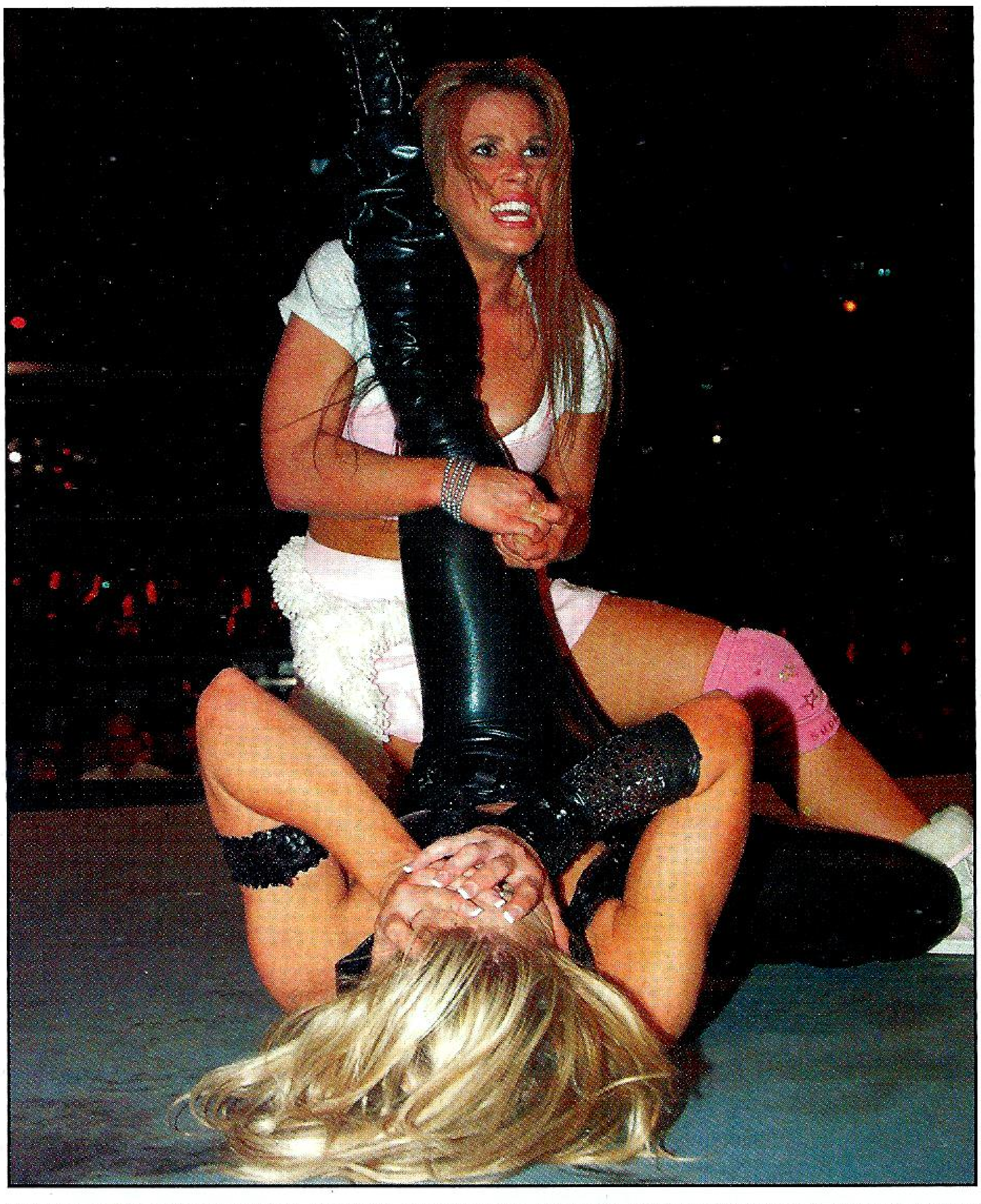
OH, MICKIE, YOU'RE SO FINE

What in the world has happened to Mickie James? I haven't seen her on Raw for what seems like months. I think it's a shame my favorite female wrestler of all-time is regularly on *Heat*—especially since I don't have Internet access. Even though I can't watch Mickie, I want her to know I'm supporting her 100 percent. I can't wait until she starts winning again so I can see her on Raw.

PRESTON GARRISON
Harrison, AR



Mickie James keeps Trish Stratus on the mat. Reader Preston Garrison longs for the time when Mickie, commonly featured on *Heat*, held the title and battled the other Divas on Raw. Garrison got his wish when James reclaimed the women's title on April 14.

NO GIMMICK NEEDED

As only a casual viewer of Smackdown and Raw, I have to say I no longer follow the sport as closely as I once did. In my opinion, WWE has become a circus once again. But I did view a lot of TNA last year and really enjoyed it.

I was very happy to see Jeff Jarrett, Kevin Nash, Sting, and Scott Hall (when he showed up). Now, with Booker T competing in TNA, that promotion will only get better.

I guess I like TNA so much because it reminds me of the old IWC, which I used to watch back in the '70s, before the gimmicks overtook the actual wrestling.

JONATHAN O'NEAL
Bloomfield, MO

ANIMAL INTESITY

The more I watch Batista compete, the more convinced I become that he's the most dangerous wrestler on the planet. On Smackdown, I just watched "The Animal" decimate Snitsky in under a minute. One spear and one power bomb was all it took.

Then Batista threw in a second power bomb just for good measure. I know Snitsky may not be a big player in the title scene, but he's still a scary dude and every bit as big as Batista, yet he was throwing Snitsky around like a rag doll. In my opinion, this match was a true indication of what Batista can accomplish when he's focused and inspired. I honestly feel nobody in WWE can stop Batista when he's on his game.

MARTY FRETZ
Lincoln, NB

ECW—NO CREATIVE PARADISE

I just finished reading "Beyond Punk! Believe It! There's Some Excellent Talent In ECW" (*The Wrestler*/Inside Wrestling, Volume 21, 2008). I couldn't disagree more with Liz Hunter's take. If Liz wants to say there are some talented wrestlers on the roster besides C.M. Punk, fine. Actually, I think Chavo Guerrero and Big Daddy V are modestly talented at best. But I'll accept her point. Where Liz goes wrong is when she tries to spin the modern-day ECW as some kind of creative paradise where mediocre wrestlers can re-invent themselves. Once upon a time that was the case. But in 2008, ECW is nothing more than a division of WWE.

MARIA CERVANTES
New York, NY

BLESSING IN DISGUISE

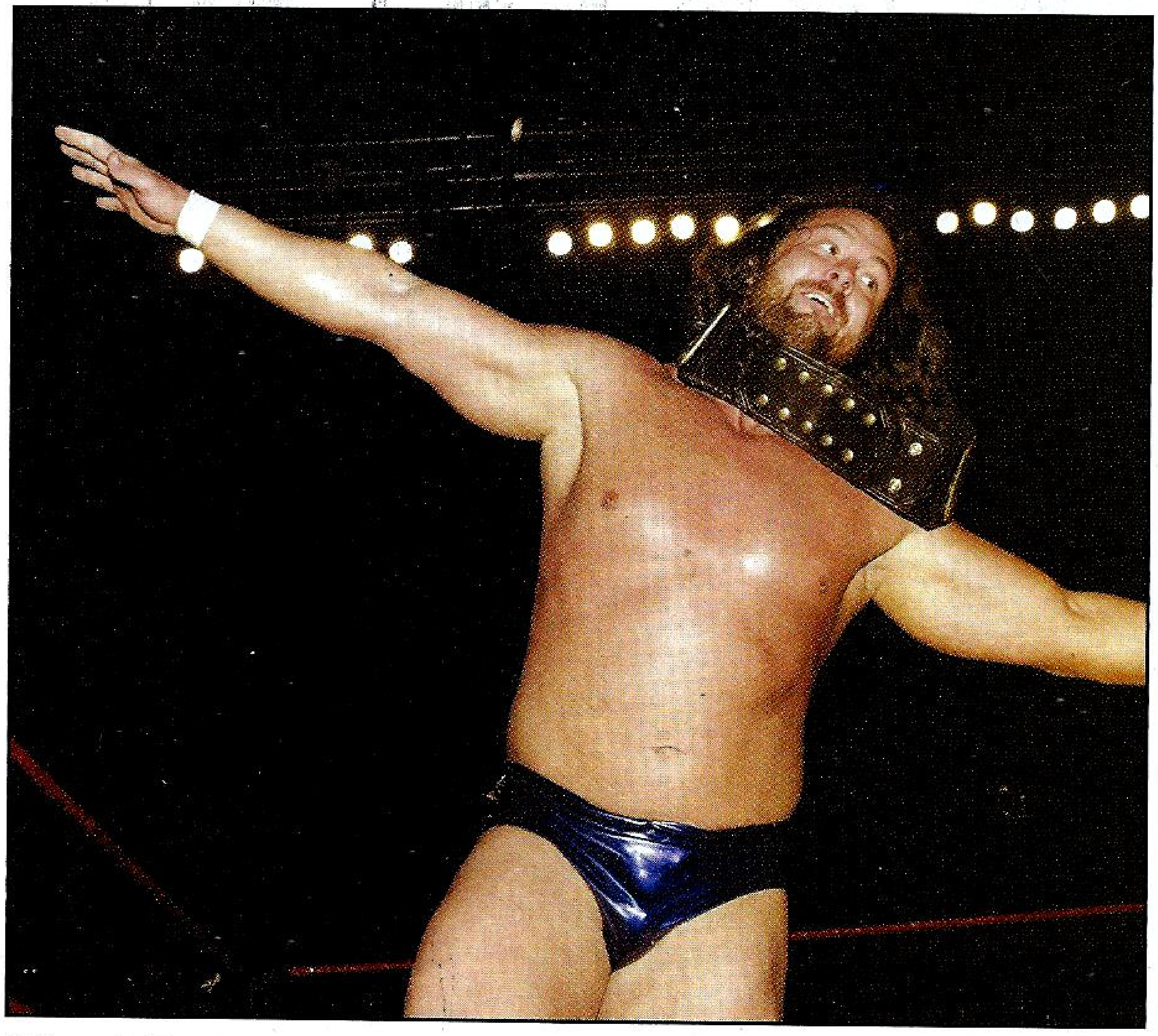
I was disappointed when I found out Eugene was let go by WWE, but now I think that may have been a blessing in disguise. I don't know how Mr. Dinsmore feels about it, but I'd rather see him as a champion in a smaller promotion like OVW than as a comedy act in WWE. Sure, he was very entertaining as Eugene, but I'll take the focused, intense Nick Dinsmore any day.

KEN FINNEMORE
Cincinnati, OH

TRIPLE-WHO?

I'm a huge fan of WWE and love Triple-H. He's my favorite wrestler. But I think he has too many nicknames. Where does he get them all? First he was the "Cerebral Assassin," then he became "The Game." Now he's being called "The King Of Kings." Please ask Triple-H to slow down with all these names. It's getting difficult for some of his fans to keep up!

SARAH MILLER
Houston, TX □



Although Eugene was a popular and entertaining WWE character, reader Ken Finnemore would much rather see Nick Dinsmore compete as the OVW champ than shuffle around as a comedy act in a WWE ring.

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PUBLISHER
Stuart M. Saks
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Lisa Rocchi-Doyle
MANAGING EDITOR
Frank Krewda
CREATIVE DIRECTOR
David Romanosky
ART DIRECTOR
Sherry Stravino
PRE-PRESS PRODUCTION SERVICES
Cliff Campo
Dave Dickey
Bethany Lawler

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR
David Lenker

SENIOR WRITERS
Dan Murphy
Brandi Mankiewicz
Frank Ingiosi
Harry Burkett
CONTRIBUTING WRITERS
Matt Brock
Elizabeth A. Hunter
Bill Meltzer
C.F. Hunter
Timothy Drake
Brady Hicks
Al Alven
Kevin McElvaney
Al Castle
Rob Bloom
Gerry Strauss
Dave Rosenbaum
Brian Solomon
Bill Apter
CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHERS
George Napolitano
Duane Long
Joe Zanolle
Timothy A. Walker
Mike Lano
George Tahinos
James McAfee
Gary Dineen
Wayne McCarty
Mary-Kate Grosso
Greg Greenland
Dorothy Lee
Scott Romer
Robert Pace
CONTRIBUTING ARTIST
Lash LeRoux

GENERAL MANAGER
Arnold C. Joseph
CIRCULATION SERVICES
David Tyler
Briana Coppola
ADVERTISING INQUIRIES
(215) 461-0583
ssaks@sepublications.com
SUBSCRIPTION INQUIRIES
Sports & Entertainment Publications LLC
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custsrvcsep@sepublications.com

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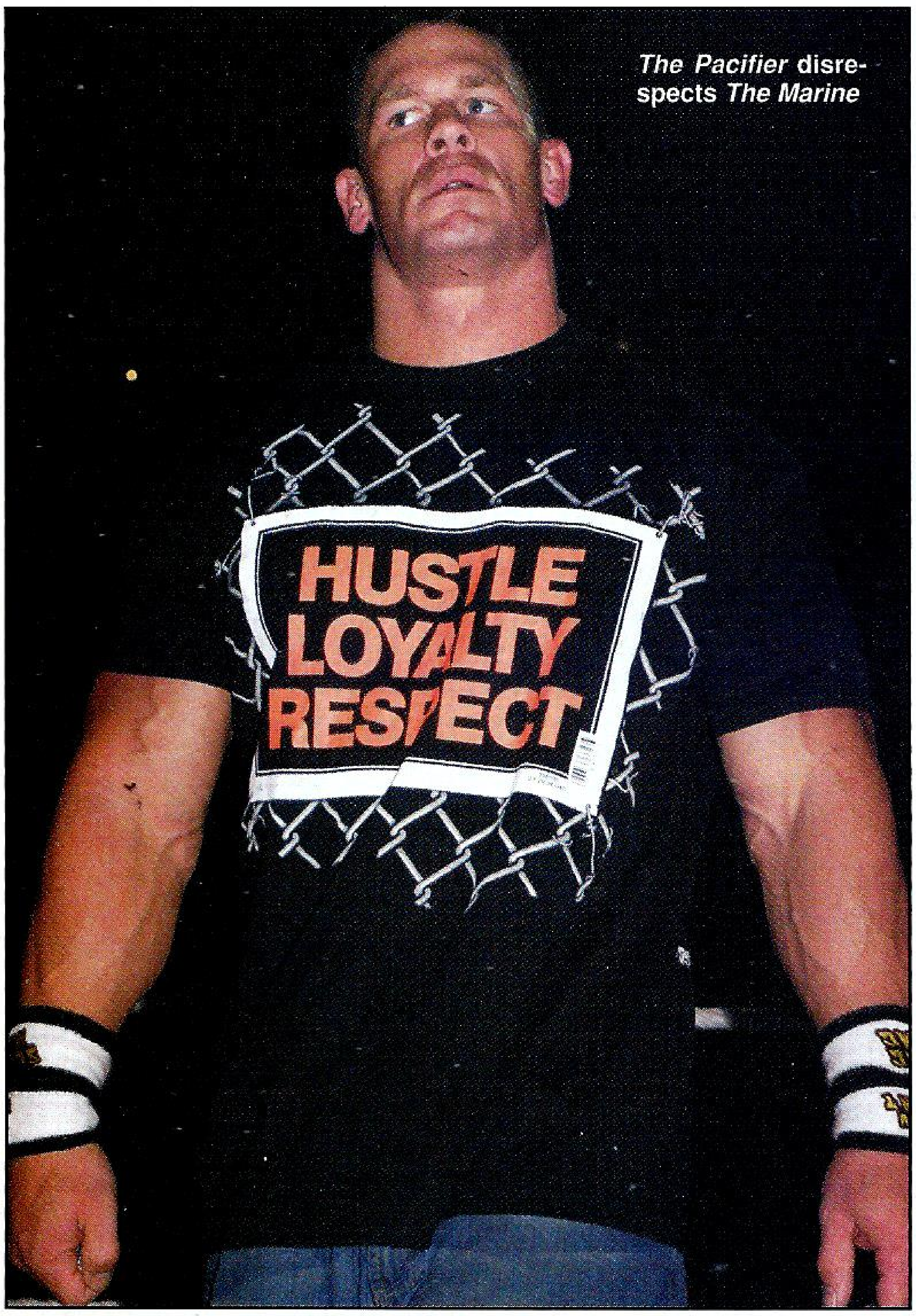
names makin' news

By Harry Burkett

FOLLOWING WRESTLEMANIA WEEKEND, it has become apparent that **Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson**'s role in the wrestling world is becoming an increasingly controversial matter. Depending on your point of view, Johnson has either continued to be a gracious ambassador of the sport ... or he has developed a Hollywood ego that has made him believe he is bigger than the industry that made him a star.

At first glance, it seemed he did an admirable job of inducting his father, **Rocky Johnson**, and his grandfather, **Peter Maivia**, into the WWE Hall of Fame on the eve of WrestleMania 24. Some of the "real time" reviews on the Internet included adjectives such as "phenomenal," "classy," and "entertaining."

Then, in the hours following Johnson's remarks, sentiments coming out of WWE told a different story. Some insiders didn't care for Johnson's shots about **Chris Jericho**'s hair, comparing his hairstyle to that of a 12-year-old boy, or—more specifically—**John Cena**'s fledgling movie career, which he compared to illegal torture. "Apparently, they would find Iraqi insurgents. They'd sit them down, tie them up, and make them watch copies of *The Marine*." Cena tried to deflect the sting by giving a look of mock horror. "I'm only kidding," added Johnson. "By the way, I made *Doom*."


The Pacifier disrespects *The Marine*

Some people saw Johnson's remark about Cena as a get-back for Cena's comments about Johnson a few weeks earlier. Cena had told the U.K. *Sun*, "The Rock is a genuinely nice guy and a fantastic human being. What I kind of get peeved about, and this is my Achilles heel, is that I've wanted to do this my whole life. Rock falls into that category. At one point, he loved wrestling and wanted to do this all his life.

"So explain to me why he can't come back for our 15th Anniversary show or why he can't make an appearance at WrestleMania. I wish he'd just show up, say hi, and leave. Do the eyebrow once and get out of town ... Associating with sports entertainment doesn't do much for his career. I get it. Just don't [expletive] me around and tell me that you love this ... Our fan base has got so much admiration for him. He's got to respect that. He doesn't give anything back."

Johnson, who was on a tight schedule, left the ceremony immediately following his speech. He didn't attend WrestleMania. Following Johnson's speech at the HOF ceremony, **Dusty Rhodes** provided another knock, stating that if WWE ever needed a two-hour special, they had it in the can. During his induction of **Ric Flair**, **Triple-H** mocked his former rival's insistence on being called "Dwayne Johnson" instead of "The Rock."

One observer criticized Johnson, who ran way over his allotted time, for turning the hallowed occasion into a self-promotional comedy roast. Another fan posted his take on the Internet, suggesting Johnson might have been auditioning to become host of the next Academy Awards broadcast. Former colleagues com-

Smell what your dad is cooking?

Photo by George Napolitano

plained about the eight-time world champion's arrogant behavior backstage.

Has Johnson "gone Hollywood"? Or are some of his former WWE rivals jealous of his success? It could be a little of both.

One WWE personality who went beyond the call of duty on WrestleMania weekend was **Jim Ross**.

Apparently, Ross had been suffering flu-like symptoms for about three weeks prior to WrestleMania. While in Orlando on the eve of the big event, Ross began having colon problems again and lost a great deal of blood. Yet Ross soldiered on and delivered one of the greatest play-by-play performances of his career.

More GI problems for J.R.

"As the old saying goes, 'the show must go on,'" Ross wrote on his blog at jrsbbq.com. "And as I was once told, 'a man can be sick at work just as easily as he can be sick at home,' so I kept my issues to myself and went about the task of doing my job."

The following Friday, Ross went to a hospital in Norman, Oklahoma, where four non-cancerous polyps were removed during a thorough colonoscopy. Ross endured a much worse ordeal in 2005, when surgeons removed a benign tumor from his colon as well as 13 inches of his large intestine.

While WWE would have preferred the **Floyd Mayweather-Big Show** match or Ric Flair's retirement make the AP wire, it seemed fireworks of another kind made more headlines. During the pyrotechnic spectacular at the Citrus Bowl following **The Undertaker**'s Smackdown World title victory over **Edge** in the main event, fireworks and hot cables went flying into the crowd, injuring 45 fans. Three were taken to the hospital by ambulance.

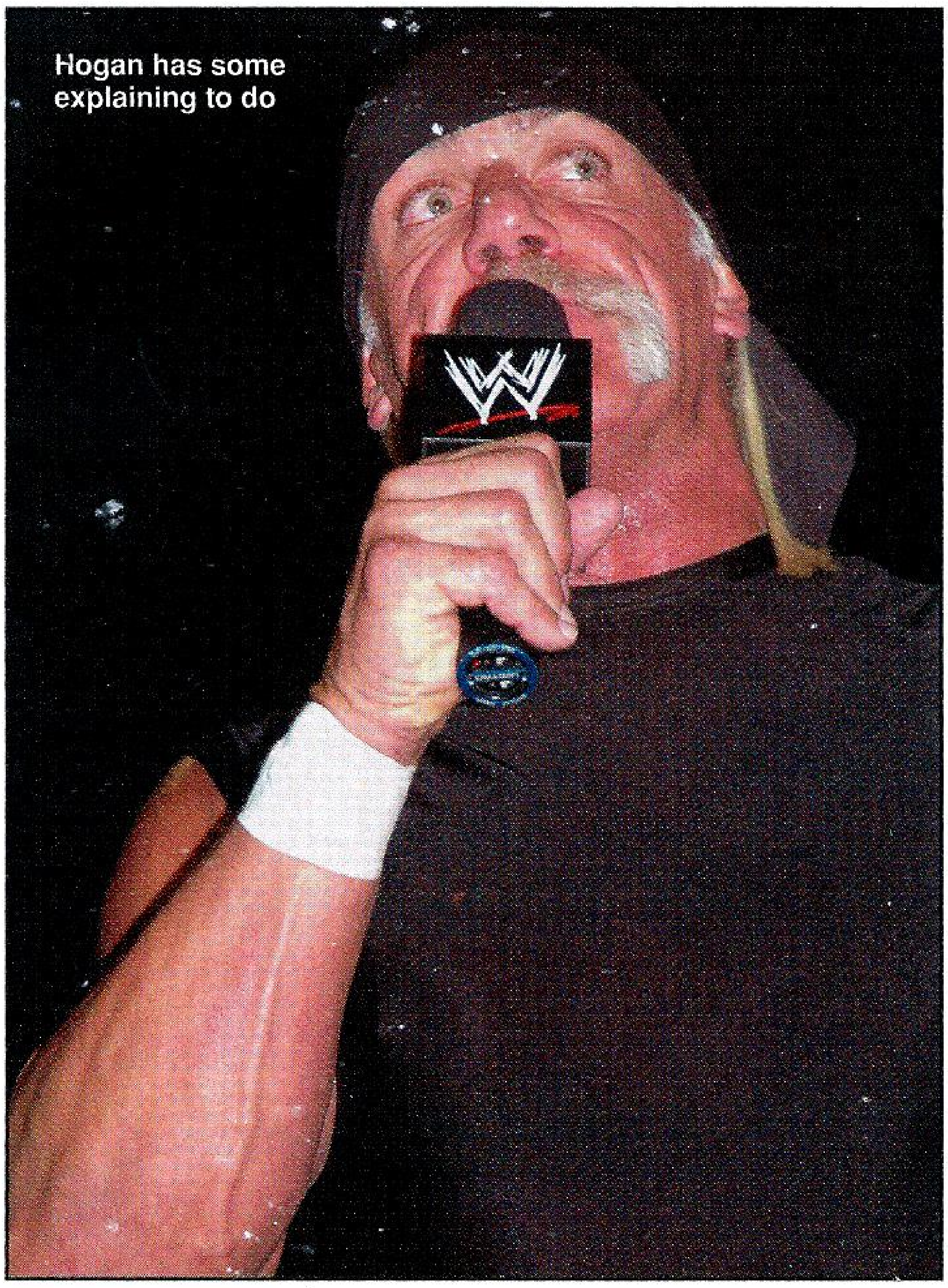
"It felt like a whip," **Barbara Vetere**, who was injured by the burning debris, told Orlando's WFTV. "I have a welt on my neck. Like a baseball bat hit me. It was horrible. Horrible."

According to **Greg Hoggatt**, assistant chief of the Orlando Fire Department, "You can see the marks on a few people where hot wires crossed and fireworks touched them."

The following day, WWE released this statement: "We're investigating the incident and doing everything we can to find out why it happened and to make sure it never happens again. While we apologize to anyone who was injured and/or alarmed by this occurrence, we take solace in the fact that the reported injuries were minor."

Despite that mishap, WWE was set to parlay its WrestleMania momentum into a successful tour of the United Kingdom in April. Fifteen of the scheduled events are already sellouts as of press time.

British fans can also look forward to a TNA tour in June. The good news is that this tour is shaping up to be very successful, too. The kick-off event was originally supposed to occur on June 13 at the Liverpool Olympia, but that venue sold out quickly. As a result, TNA has added a second show at the Olympia to take place a day earlier, on June 12. Other arenas include the Coventry Skydome as well as the Brentwood

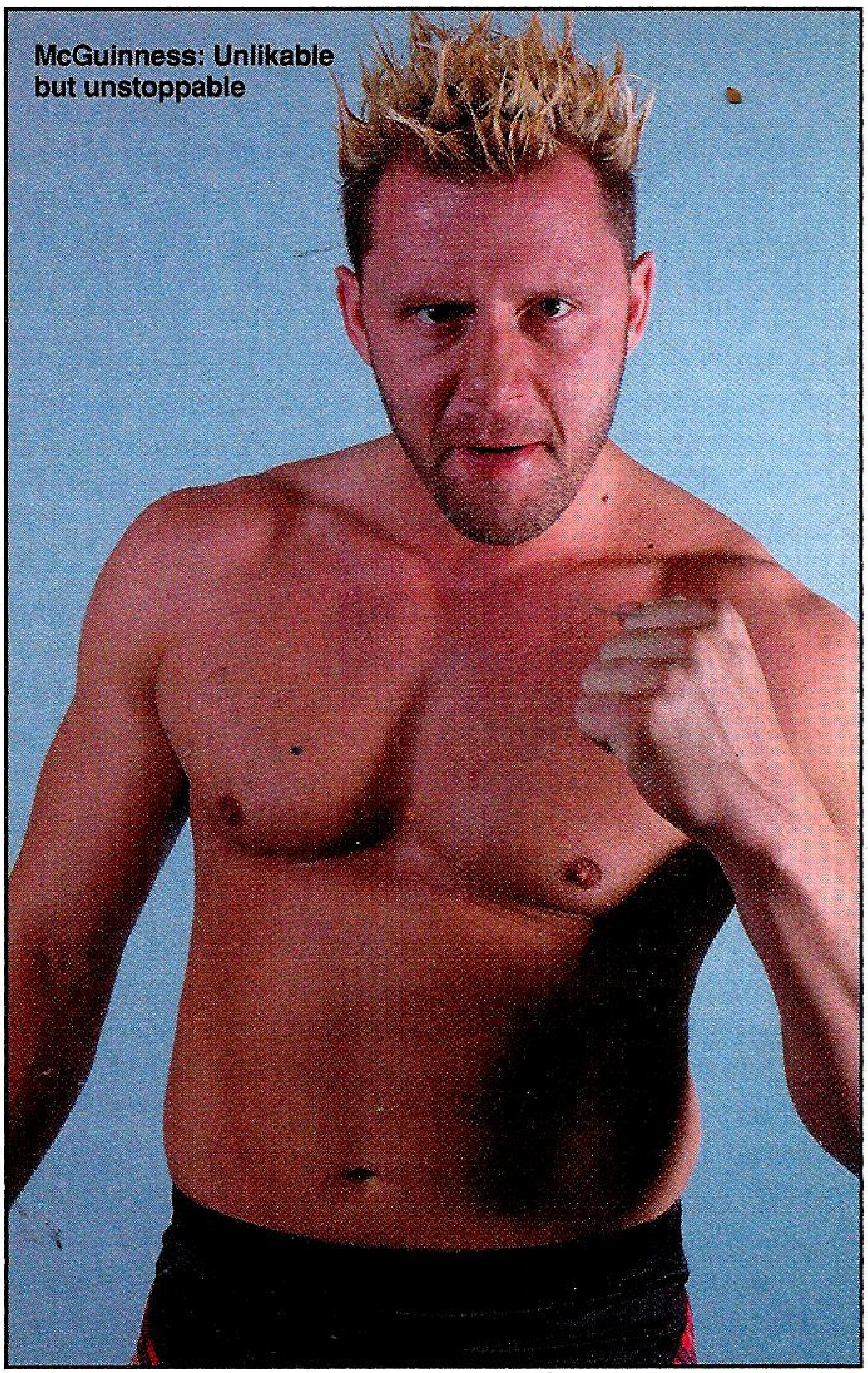

Hogan has some explaining to do

The Briscoes and Sytch left the ring together, and each of them flashed the hand signal of **The Triple Threat**, which was comprised of **Shane Douglas**, **Bam Bam Bigelow**, and Sytch's old boyfriend, **Chris Candido**.

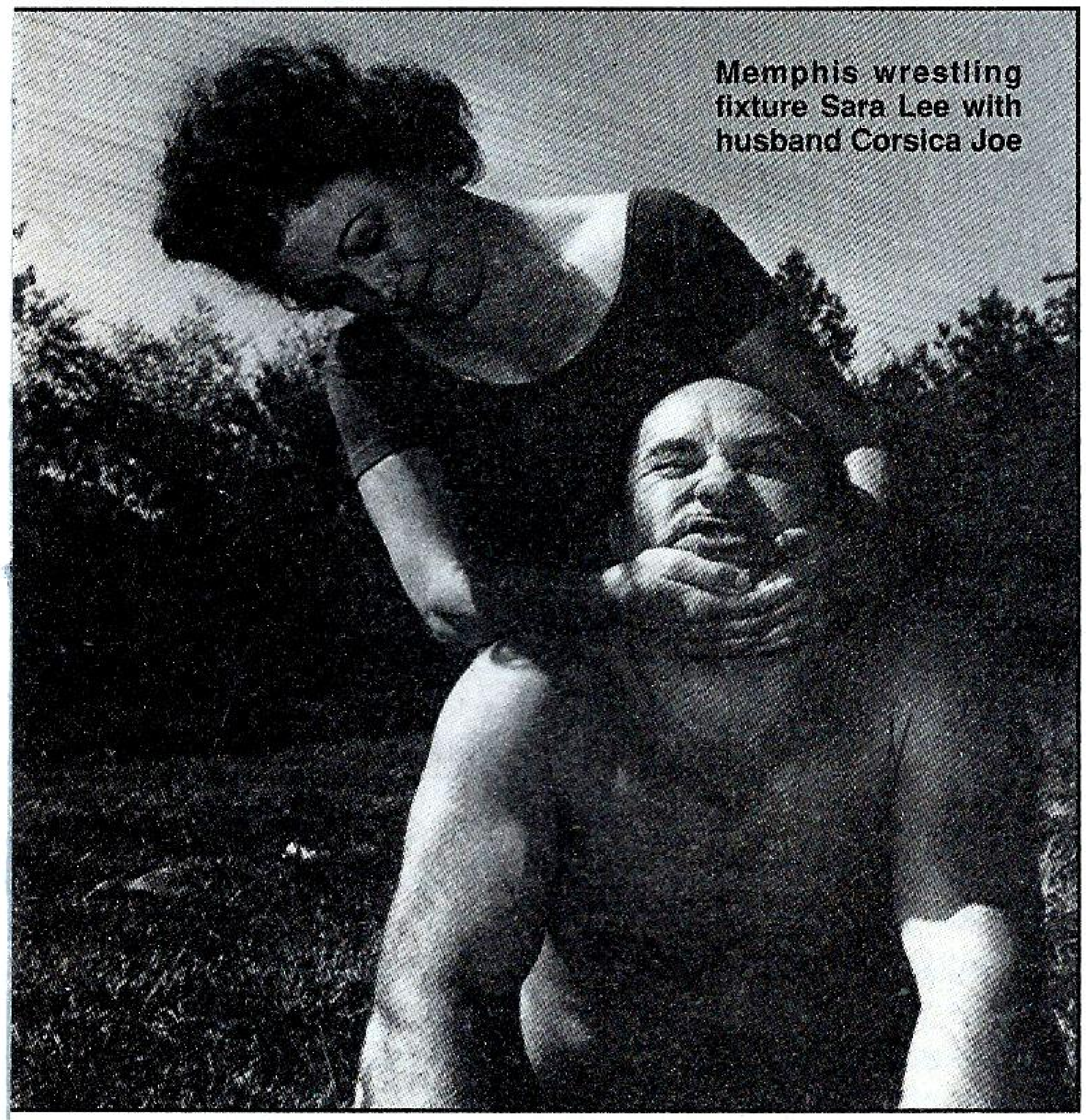
Traditionally, the "Supercard Of Honor" event concludes with a six-man Dragon Gate match, and this year was no different. **Naruki Doi**, **Genki Horiguchi**, and **Masato Yoshino** defeated CIMA, Ryo Saito, and The Dragon Kid in a breathtaking marathon encounter.

News from the Millennium Wrestling Federation: **John Cena Sr.** is assuming a more visible role in the promotion by serving as the MWF president and hosting his own show at bostonwrestling.com ... **Todd Hanson**'s recent MWF title defense against **"Diehard" Eddie Edwards** was postponed after he was attacked by a mysterious stalker who is terrorizing the promotion ... Former ROH star **John Walters** has returned to wrestling—and his home promotion of the MWF—after a long absence.

This 'n' that: **Nancy Benoit**'s family has created a foundation for battered women and children. You may send donations to the Nancy and **Daniel Benoit** Foundation, c/o Decker, Hallman, Barber, and Briggs, 260 Peachtree Street, Suite 1700, Atlanta, GA 30303 ... The Georgia House of Representatives killed State Senate Bill 413, which would have tightened regulations on pro wrestling, by a decisive 105-57 vote ... Florida champion **Jake Hager** defeated Southern champion **Heath Miller** to unify the two titles in Tampa. FCW officials have opted to retire the Southern belt and recognize the Florida title as its sole singles championship ... *The Orlando Sentinel* reported that city staffers asked WWE to produce WrestleMania billboards that weren't too provocative. The result? The nipples of John Cena, Triple-H, **Randy Orton**, and The Big Show were airbrushed from a massive sign in downtown Orlando.



McGuinness: Unlikable but unstoppable



Memphis wrestling fixture Sara Lee with husband Corsica Joe

From "The Hulkster" on the Prowl Dept.: Only a couple of months before it was revealed that Hulk Hogan had an affair with his daughter's personal assistant, 30-year-old **Christine Plante**, while he was still with his wife, **Linda Bollea**, "The Hulkster" has taken on a new main squeeze, **Jennifer McDaniel**, who is a bit closer to his age. Shots of the couple frolicking in the ocean were posted on a gossip website, thesuperficial.com.

Before we part, I'd like to acknowledge the passing of **Sara Lee**. She was a top star in Tennessee throughout the 1950s and '60s, and later went on to help **Christine Jarrett** on the promotional side of the business. In fact, she handled the ticket window at Nashville's Fairgrounds Coliseum, where she had wrestled many times during her career, when Christine's grandson, **Jeff Jarrett**, launched Total Nonstop Action Wrestling in 2002. Lee was married to **Corsica Joe** for 46 years and resided in Old Hickory, Tennessee.

Nobody didn't like Sara Lee!

That's all for now. Save a ringside seat for me. □

data sheet

CODY RHODES

HEIGHT: 6'1"
WEIGHT: 232
HOMETOWN: Charlotte, NC

GREATEST MOMENT TO DATE: December 10, 2007—in front of a huge national TV audience, Rhodes captures the Raw World tag team title with Bob Holly on Raw's 15th Anniversary episode. The once contentious duo defeated incumbents Lance Cade and Trevor Murdoch in a surprisingly technical match.

HE DOES IT SO WELL: Much like a Randy Orton or Rock, Rhodes utilizes the benefit of growing up in a wrestling family to his advantage. At only 22 years old, Rhodes' ring knowledge surpasses most of his peers'. Physically, he's much stronger than his deceptively slight frame suggests.

WHERE HE NEEDS TO IMPROVE: Rhodes needs to learn to pace himself throughout a match if he intends to enjoy singles success. While his intensity and over-exuberance can easily be chalked up to the excitement of being part of the main WWE roster, Rhodes has struggled at times when Holly is not at his side.

PET FINISHER: Flowing snap DDT

BIGGEST TEST TO DATE: In late-September 2007, while Rhodes was still earning his place as a member of the Raw roster, he had a brief but vicious feud with future mentor Holly. For a young wrestler looking to gain confidence, Holly's own brand of "tough love" proved to be the perfect inspiration. He survived Holly's onslaught and is better for it.

OUTLOOK FOR 2008: Rhodes was cruising early on in 2008, but he's going to have to carve more of a path for himself—whatever the consequence—if he wants to step outside his father's shadow. While he's still young, Rhodes should start to make strides toward becoming his own man as the year comes to an end.

QUICKIE EXPERT ANALYSIS: "I know from experience that the kid is hard-headed and, as one thoroughbred to another, I can see he's got the tools to be the next, well, me."—Randy Orton

HERNANDEZ

HEIGHT: 6'2"
WEIGHT: 295
HOMETOWN: Houston, TX

GREATEST MOMENT TO DATE: August 24, 2006—as a freshly inducted member of the rulebreaking group LAX, Hernandez captured the TNA World tag team title with Homicide by defeating a streaking A.J. Styles and Christopher Daniels on an episode of *Impact*. That first reign would last exactly one month.

HE DOES IT SO WELL: Hernandez is as pure a power wrestler as there is in TNA. His passing resemblance to Kurt Angle is fitting, as Hernandez mixes in a fair share of suplexes and ground attacks to go along with his unforgiving power game.

WHERE HE NEEDS TO IMPROVE: Speed is certainly not one of Hernandez' more bountiful traits. This downside is mitigated by being part of a team with the speedy Homicide. But, overall, it has been his greatest detriment. Plus, given his size, he would have to sacrifice mass to increase his speed, and that wouldn't be a great idea.

PET FINISHER: Border toss

BIGGEST TEST TO DATE: Not one to back down from a challenge, Hernandez' biggest in-ring test came in April 2007 during a feud with tag legends Team 3D. Although LAX lost the gold in the end, Hernandez grew as both a competitor and a leader.

OUTLOOK FOR 2008: With the beautiful yet dangerous Salinas in their corner, LAX finally appear to be finding their comfort zone after a tumultuous 2007. Throughout early-2008, Hernandez has emerged as the rock upon which the faction is built. Although the danger that comes with adding a third party is the potential for internal friction. Hernandez needs to pay attention to both Homicide and Salinas.

QUICKIE EXPERT ANALYSIS: "He's one of the toughest SOBs I've ever faced in TNA. I don't like the man, but I will say he can fight with the best of us."—James Storm

TNA
Hernandez
5150

on the road

With Dave Lenker

TONE DOESN'T necessarily translate so well in the written word. Even the best writers can't always convey emotions or attitudes with the words they put on paper. But I can tell you that when I typed the sentence, "There has to be something interesting in the works for him, right?" to run in this space just one issue and two months ago, I didn't mean it to be particularly optimistic.

I was writing about The Big Show and news that he had just re-signed with WWE after a hiatus that lasted more than a year.

Guess I was right, even if I didn't really mean it.

Show against one the best boxers in the world, Floyd Mayweather Jr., at WrestleMania 24. Pretty interesting to me.

Very interesting that Ric Flair went out of his way during WrestleMania weekend—his Hall of Fame/retirement celebration weekend, no less—to mention to everyone listening that he thought Show was the best big man with whom he has shared a ring. The cynic in me would point out to "Naitch" that if Show hasn't really taken over the sport 13 years into his career, he might want to rethink that assessment.

I might also remind you that cameras caught Show bawling his eyes out during Flair's Hall of Fame speech. I know that was a night for everyone to shed his or her wrestling persona, but a weeping giant won't sell too many pay-per-views or much merchandise.

I might stay on my roll and remind you that Show did end up losing to Mayweather at WrestleMania, even if the boxer needed the help of his entire entourage to slay his mammoth wrestler foe.

Show said all the right things the night after WrestleMania 24. Ran down Mayweather without sounding like a whiner and vowed to get back to doing what he does best—presumably destroying whatever opponent, big or small, stands across the ring from him. He immediately had it out with The Great Khali that Monday night, then destroyed the woefully overmatched but somewhat popular Colin Delaney on ECW TV the following night.

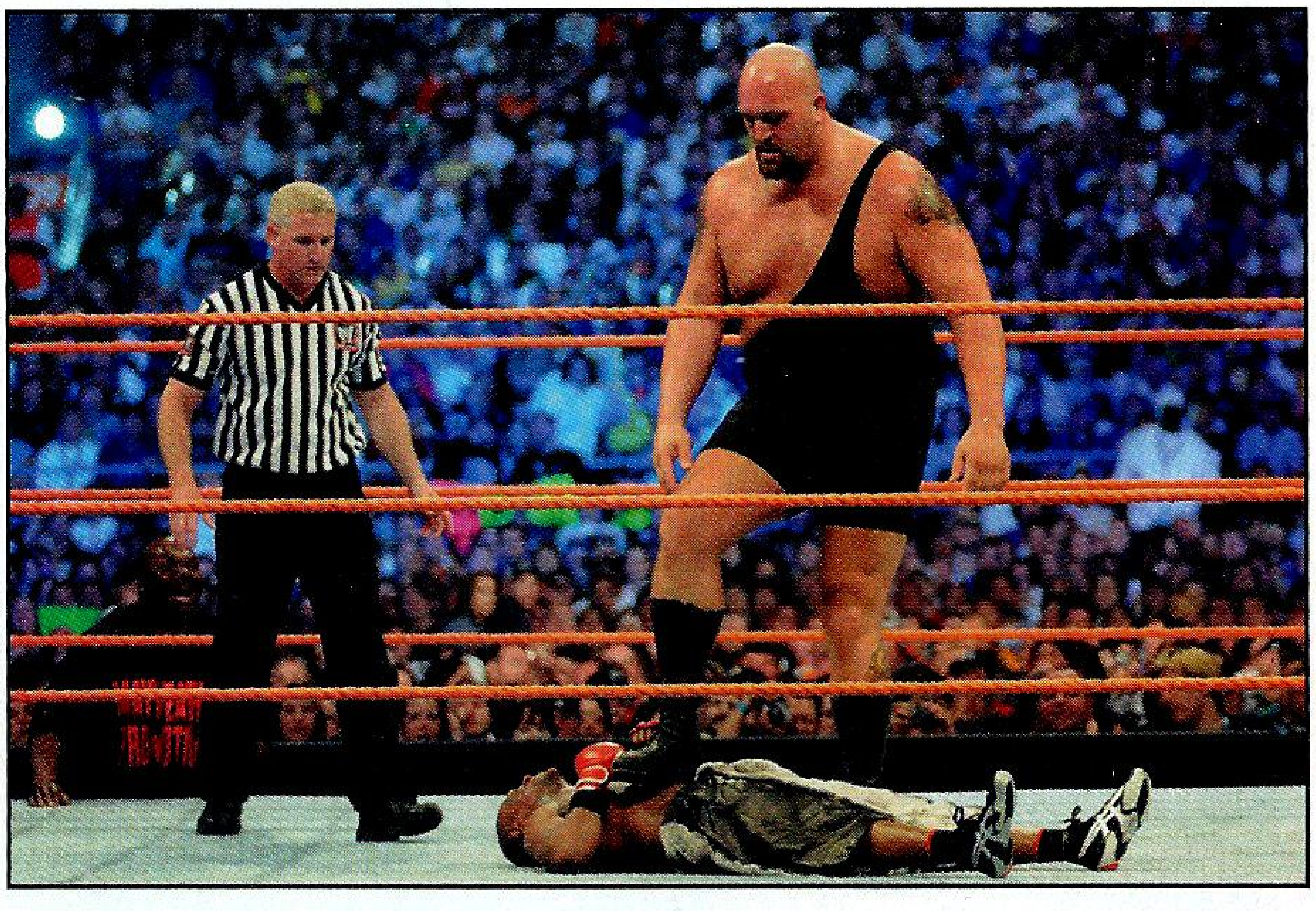
Seems like a valiant attempt on the part of Show and WWE Creative to hit the reset button. But this is going to be extremely difficult to pull off.

Back to Flair for a moment. Maybe he said what he said about Show in part because they've become friends. It's hard to believe Show would have been crying the way he did if they weren't tight. But I can't believe he wasn't being genuine. And the comment turned a head or two because, well, Flair saw a lot of big men, small men, medium-sized men, skinny men, and fat men over 36 years. He was in the ring with virtually every name of note during that stretch.

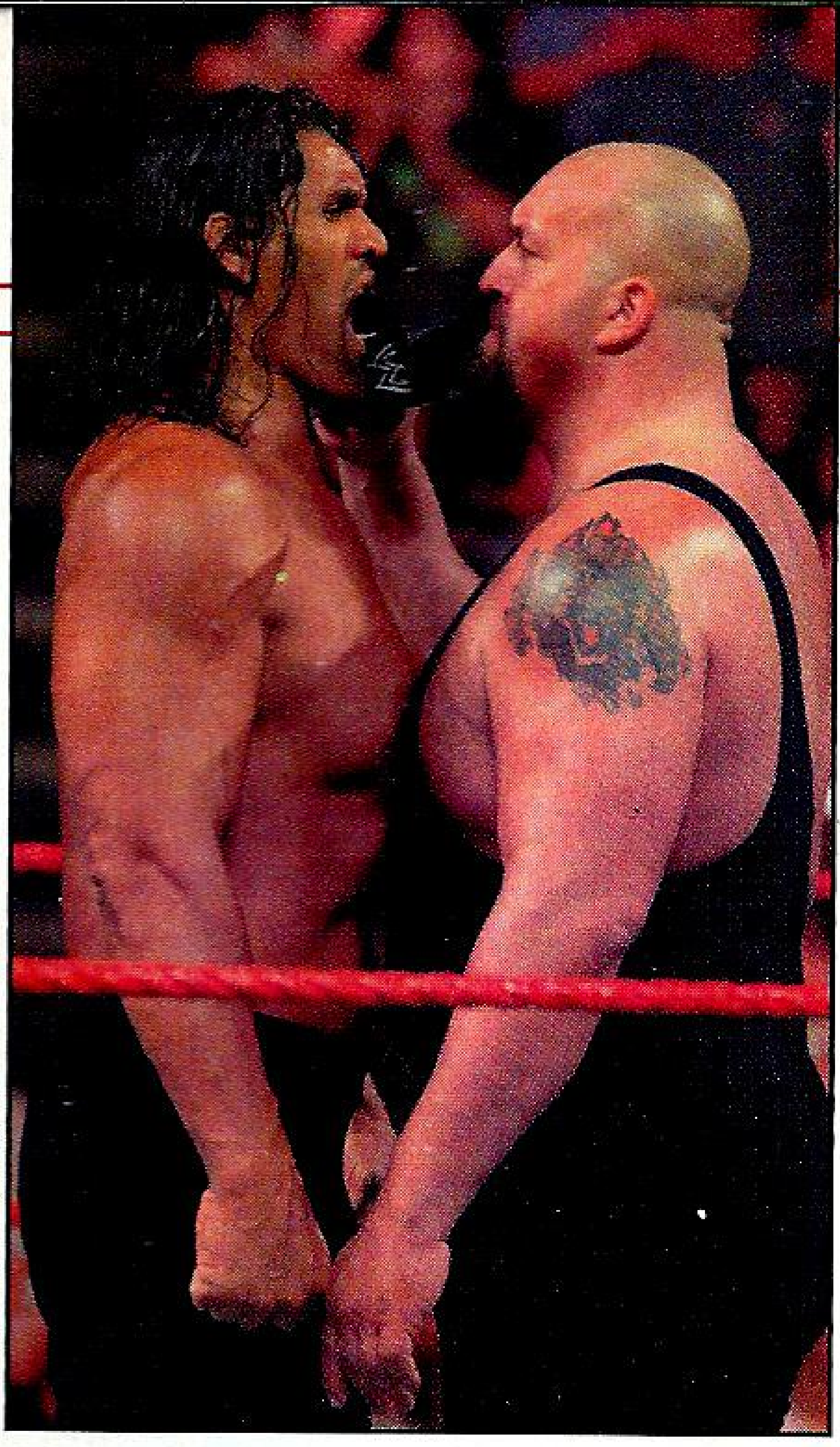
You might remember Andre the Giant. Pretty decent big man, he was. Flair told Show he knew Andre very well, but he apparently likes how Show sizes up with him, so to speak.

Fact is, Andre's mystique was a product of his size (obviously), his freakish look, and his amazing skills for a man his size, but it was also in part a product of the era in which he thrived. I mean specifically the territory era. Andre probably made his most money when he turned heel and battled old friend Hulk Hogan for the WWF World title at WrestleMania III, after Vince McMahon took the WWF national on the strength of "Hulkamania." But he built his mystique years earlier.

I remember watching in awe on those somewhat rare occasions in the early-1980s when Andre would show up on WWF TV and manhandle a prelim wrestler or three, or when he'd



The best "big man" in the game? According to Ric Flair he is. But even though Big Show is in control of Floyd "Money" Mayweather here, the diminutive boxer scored a knockout victory over Show at WM24.



Big Show squares off against someone who is more his physical equal, the Great Khali on the Raw following WrestleMania. Big Show has no use for bullies—and that's exactly what Khali is.

appear at one of the monthly shows at the old Spectrum in Philadelphia.

Had Show been born 20 years earlier, he could have built the same mystique. Maybe he would have been judged better than Andre. But territories in wrestling are long gone, and for most of the past 13 years, we've been able to see Big Show or, in his previous (WCW) life, The Giant, on TV several times per week—every week. We've seen him turn good, turn bad, and turn back again several times. We've seen him do comedy and seen him recover from a fall off the roof of Joe Louis Arena in Detroit. We've seen him, we've seen him, and we've seen him. I caught his appearance on *Larry King Live* just days before this year's 'Mania and laughed when the always-prepared King asked if he ever lost. We've seen him lose countless times on free TV and are hardly surprised when he does get pinned.

Even after this hiatus, he just doesn't seem all that fresh.

This is a challenge every WWE and even every TNA wrestler faces today and has faced for years now. If a wrestler can't jump from territory to territory, staying fresh is difficult no matter how good and/or charismatic a wrestler is. No wrestler has it tougher than the one who counts on mystique to thrive. Isn't that more or less what Show was saying when he delivered that very simple promo 24 hours after WrestleMania 24? That he wants to become an unstoppable force again, a dominant monster? Most of us have enjoyed some of the attempts to make Show appealing in other ways over the years. He has good comedic timing, as evidenced by his appearance on *Saturday Night Live* with The Rock, Triple-H, Mick Foley, and Vince McMahon in 2000 and during the days he showed he could do damn good impressions of some of his fellow superstars.

However, above all else, he's a giant with, in theory, the same freakish appeal Andre once had. Show deserves credit for updating his arsenal of moves over the years, but he is not and never will be a great wrestler. We never saw or hoped to see him go hold for hold on the mat with Kurt Angle. The best he could ever hope for is being "great for his size."

I'm not sure Andre would be quite the mythical figure he once was if he were in his prime today. Now, presumably, Show will try to buck the odds and regain some of his aura of invincibility. Think of how many times WCW and WWE tried to do that with Goldberg after his undefeated streak was broken. The man was never really "Da Man" again. Try to count the number of times WWE has tried to rebuild Kane into a monster. Has it ever been successful?

Show has much more size going for him than those guys did, but I'll be surprised if it works. Much more so than I was that WWE actually did have something truly interesting in the works for Show when he returned. ☐

DON'T MISS PWI UPDATE WITH FRANK INGIOSI

EXCLUSIVELY ON: pwi-online.com

Pro Wrestling Illustrated Senior Writer Frank Ingiosi is insightful, provocative, and downright funny! You've read "The Trade's Mark" in *PWI*. Now check out Frank's column, "The Turn," every Friday afternoon.

Ingiosi on Mark Henry: "We've tried channeling our angst as a way to hopefully motivate Mark. You know, Internet-column tough love and whatnot. But, alas, our desires were met with more mediocrity and disappointment. At the very least we hoped Mark would ditch his angry image and just return to the always-lovable 'Sexual Chocolate'-style ways. Sadly, there would be no chocolate for us, sexual or otherwise."

Ingiosi on Jeff Hardy turning 30: "From all of us at "The Turn," happy birthday, Jeff. Keep up the great work. We wanted to get you something, but apparently there isn't a Cameron-area orthopedic surgeon that sells gift certificates."

Ingiosi on "Pacman" Jones in TNA: "Now we're left with a tag team in which one man can wrestle and the other's greatest contribution is taking his shirt off and scurrying around the ring goading his opponents into easily avoided situations. Does it work? No. Is it a draw? Can't imagine that it is. Is it insulting to the fans? Probably to some, yet they still go nuts for Team Pacman each time they enter the Impact Zone."

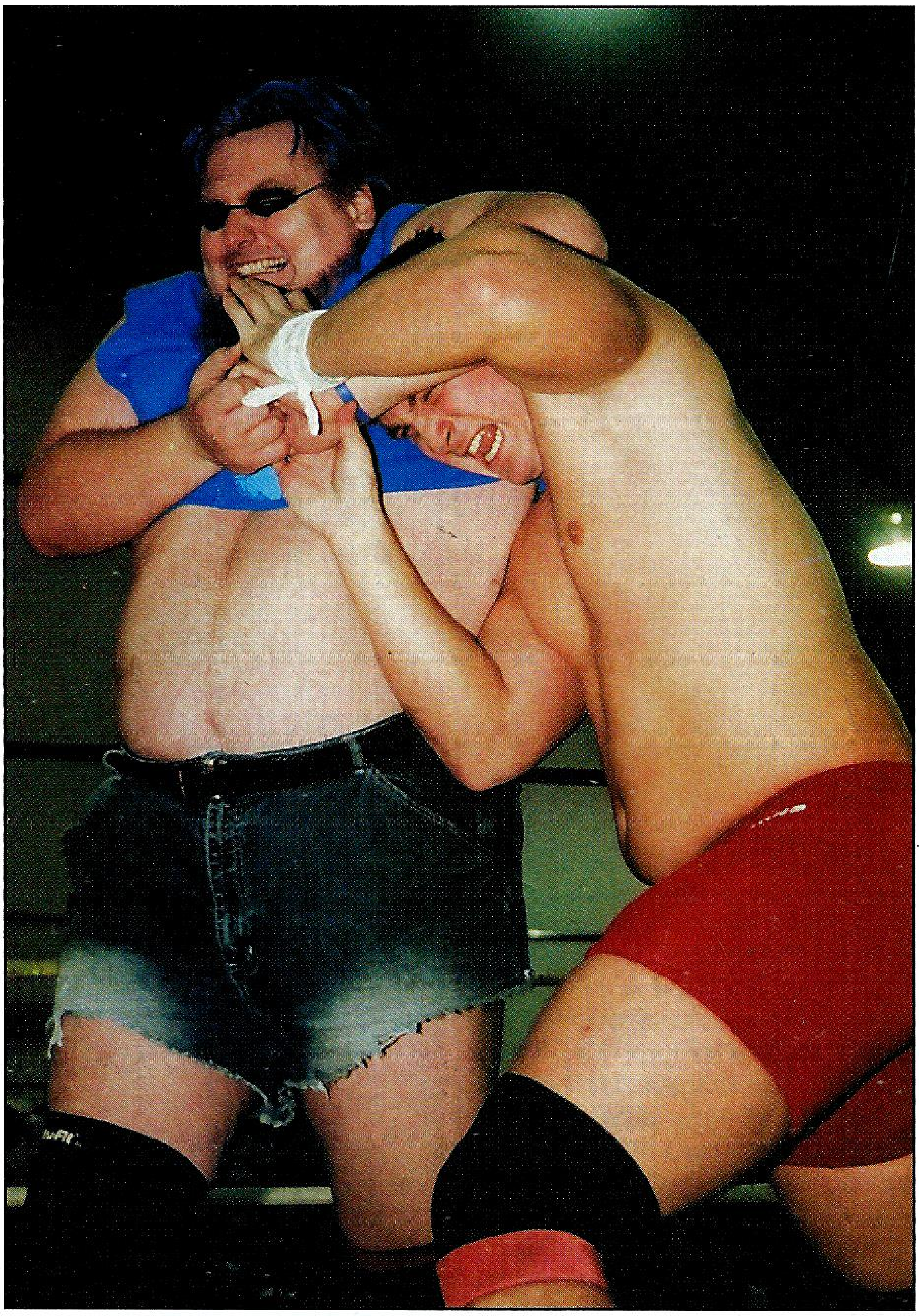
Frank Ingiosi ... on pwi-online.com!

7813/10.07

the insider

By Brandi Mankiewicz

I'M A GEEK. Seriously, I am. While watching Raw one fateful Monday night, I flipped to *Paranormal State*, a new ghost hunting show on A&E. Being a fan of *Ghost Hunters* on Sci Fi, I was intrigued that another channel decided to do its own ghost-centric show. Boy, was I unimpressed. I felt like I was watching *WCW Thunder*. It's a bunch of Penn State University students and teachers trying to act like professionals and failing miserably in the process. Hell, I even turned back to the John Cena lovefest on Raw because I was so blasé about the show.

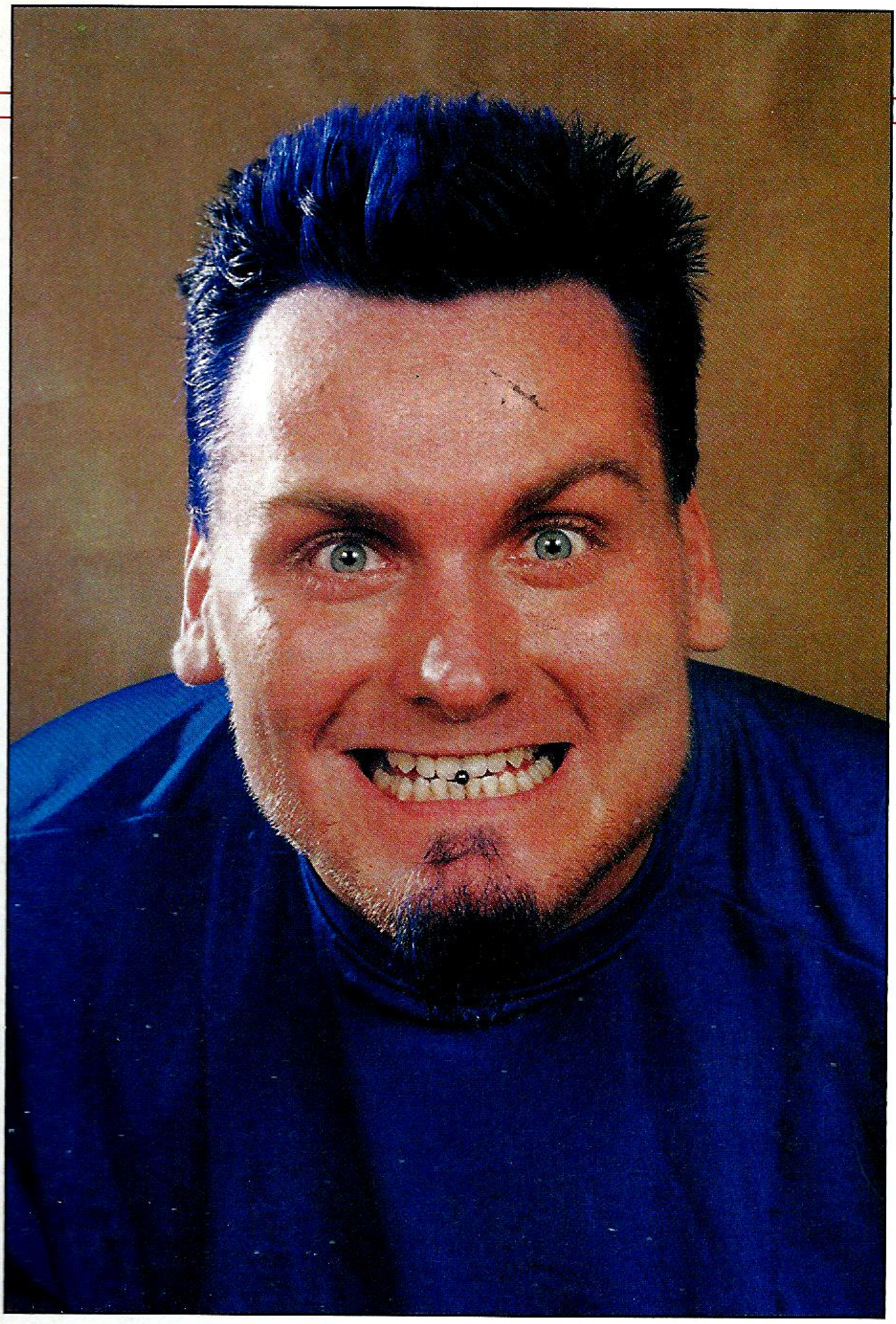


After experiencing years in the wrestling world and witnessing the genius of the smallest indy wrestling promotions—existing thanks to *Web Design For Dummies* and a few disposable cameras—the Blue Meanie and I decided to begin our own small-minded organization in a different genre.

The next day, I expressed my displeasure with *Paranormal State* to a fellow *Ghost Hunters* fan, The Blue Meanie. Yes, *The* Blue Meanie of ECW fame. My Blue Love and I have been good friends ever since I laid my brown eyes on his blue hair and painted-on eyeglasses. We share many common interests, including an interest in the paranormal. Meanie had seen the show I was lamenting about to him, and he concurred with my assessment of it.

"That group is like a bad independent wrestling promotion compared to TAPS," wrote Meanie via AIM. At least it isn't just me who prefers The Atlantic Paranormal Society (TAPS) to the group out of Penn State University. TAPS is much more interesting in my opinion—*err*, our collective opinion. But Meanie's comment got me thinking. What if ghost hunting was just like independent wrestling? Of course there would be awesome top-notch, Ring Of Honor-type promotions like TAPS. But then, there would be the crappy ones that suck, like PSU's Paranormal Research Society. So in honor of ghost hunting and independent wrestling, I am announcing that Blue Meanie and I are starting our own crappy independent ghost-hunting group, in theory at least.

Now I'm hoping that most of you readers at least have heard of *Ghost Hunters*. C.M. Punk and Elijah Burke have both been guests on TAPS' annual Halloween show that is broadcast live each year. If you're not a fan, you're lame. I suggest checking it out. It's on the same channel as ECW, so it should be easy enough for you to find.



In the world of fantasy football, YouTube webcasts, self-indulgent blogs, and backyard wrestling, anyone can make themselves feel important ... just ask expert of fright and WIGS co-founder and champion The Blue Meanie.

Back to the fantasy group. It's currently called Workers Investigating Ghosts and Such, a.k.a. WIGS. Sure, it's not as cool of an acronym as TAPS, but we can change it. The important part is that we're using cool insider carny terms like "workers" instead of "wrestlers" because we're part of wrestling, ya know.

"As an indy group, we need to have a promoter," wrote Meanie. I agreed. So we would like to announce the appointment of the co-promoters Blue Meanie and myself of the newly formed WIGS—similar to what any crappy independent group would do. It's just the natural indy way.

Since I'm not a wrestler by any means, it is customary that the only trained wrestler currently involved in this project is the heavyweight ghost-hunting champion of the world. As an official co-promoter of WIGS, I announce the crowning of our first champion: The Blue Meanie. He won the title via a tournament in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on a recent tour of that fine state. The Blue Meanie will be presented the 20-pound cardboard-studded belt at the first official ghost hunt we do. Oh, that's not going to happen anytime soon, but it sounds good, doesn't it?

"We'll need a website immediately," wrote Meanie. Every crappy wrestling promotion usually starts with an equally crappy wrestling website. Of course, that means we need to find someone with no html skills to produce it for us. Can't forget about photographs, either. Despite my dozen years as a trained studio photographer, I'll put down my Canon DSLR for this shoot. I'll just use whatever crappy, disposable camera I can find at the dollar store—just like any other crappy independent.

Now, we'll also need a "street team" to help us promote our fine organization. These non-paid slaves will get the fun of plastering the Philadelphia region with our posters. *Oooh!* Posters!

I almost forgot! We'll have to announce on our website that we're bringing in some big name ghost hunter like Jason Hawes, Grant Wilson, or Steve Gonsalves from TAPS as a special guest. Of course, they'll never actually show up at our crappy indy ghost-hunting gig because we'll never contact them.

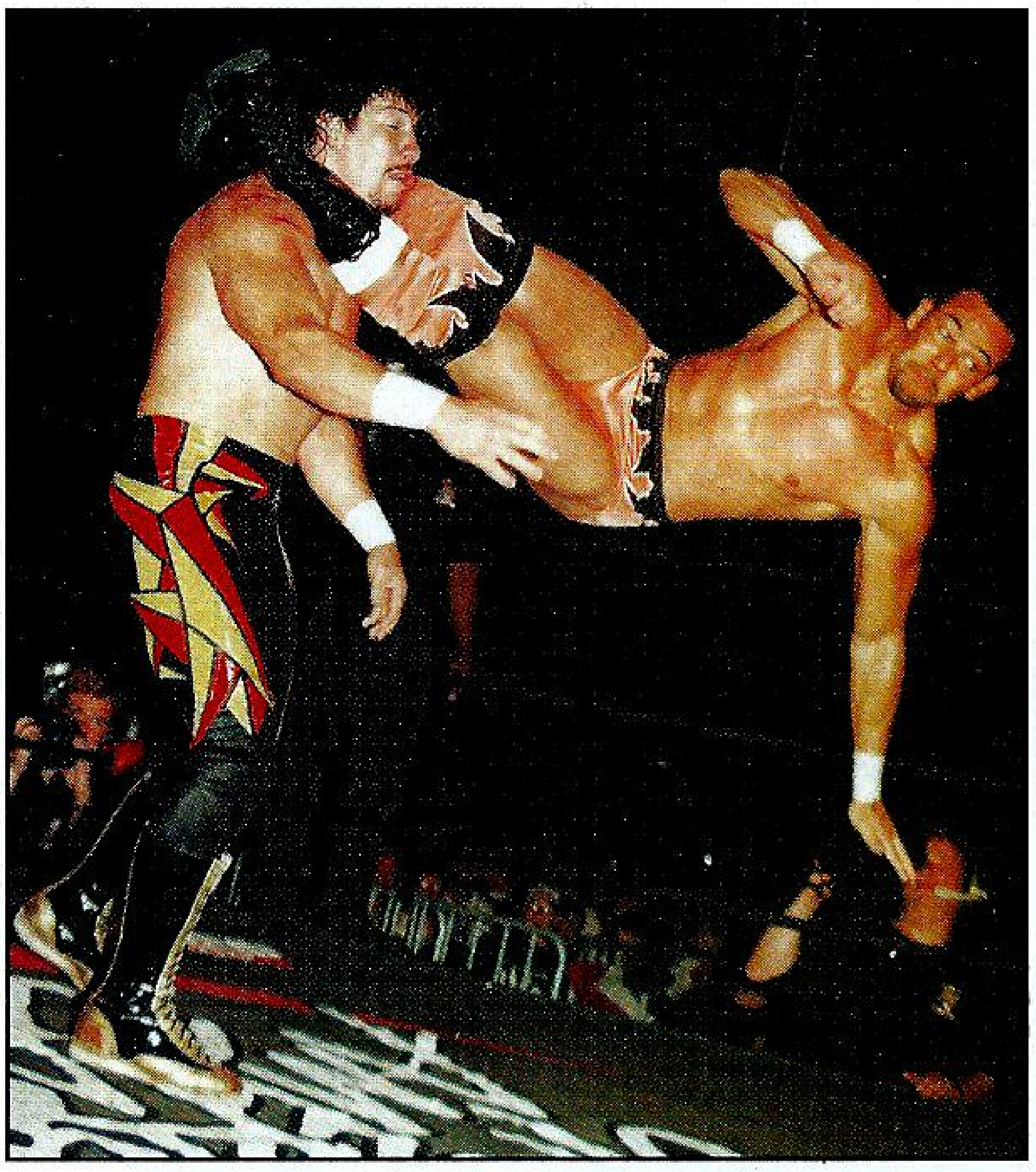
Finally, I think we'll need to print up special membership cards like the ones INSIDE WRESTLING used to do for wrestling fans back in the day. Want to join the WIGS version of the Boogie Woogie Brigade? Sure you can. Just visit our website for instructions on how to join.

Ya know, I'm thinking Meanie and I have hit on a new and exciting venture for wrestling fans everywhere. How could it not work? Crappy independents somehow survive.

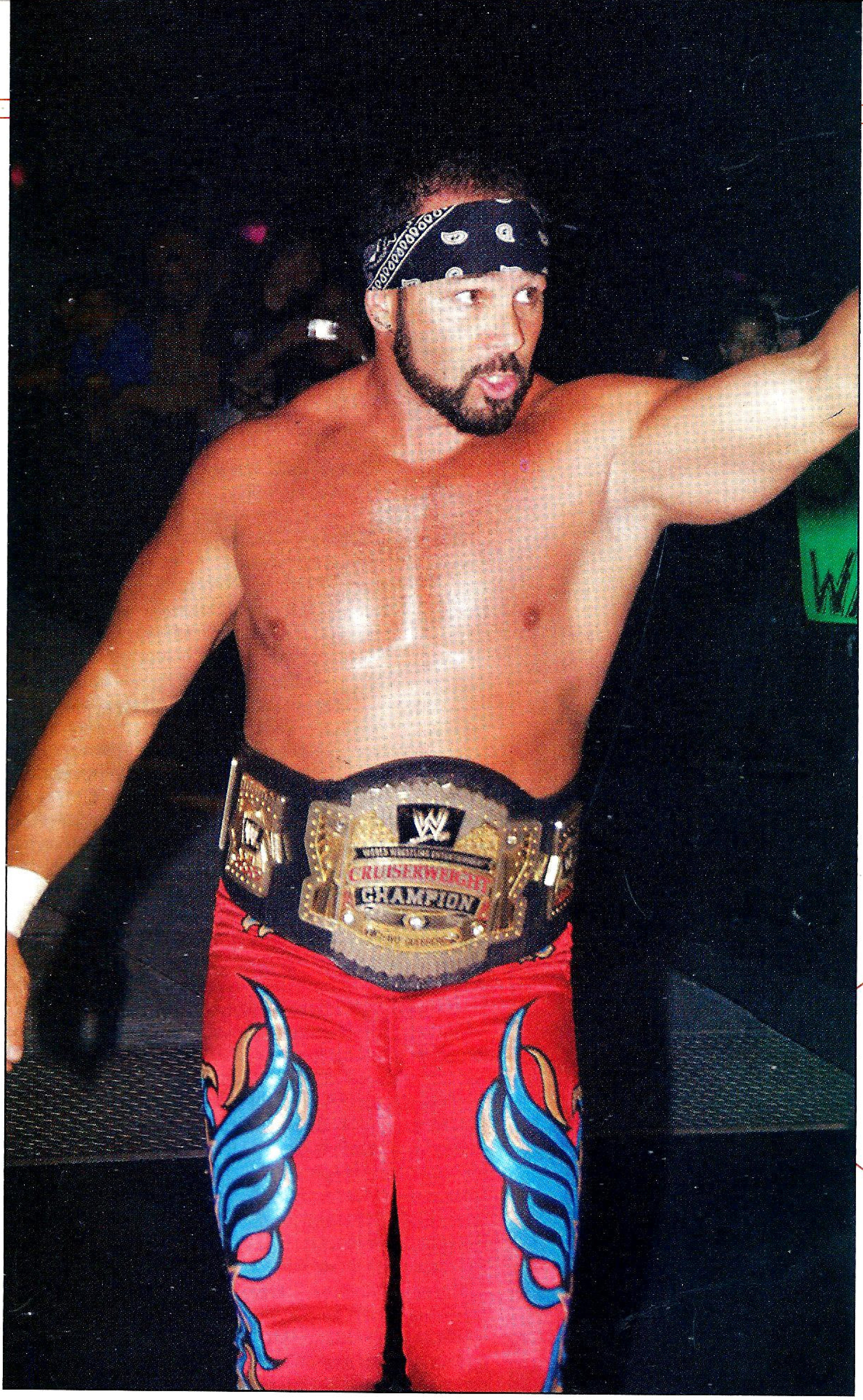
capsule profile 341

Chavo Guerrero Jr.

TRAINED IN EL Paso, Texas, the third-generation Guerrero made his professional debut in 1994 ... Chavo competed in Mexico, as well as for various U.S. independent promotions ... Wrestled for New Japan in 1996 ... Debuted that same year for World Championship Wrestling ... Guerrero returned to New Japan shortly thereafter as part of a WCW talent exchange ... In WCW, he was taken under the wing of his Uncle Eddie, but refused his advice to break the rules ... Lost a hair-vs.-hair match to Eddie at Bash at the Beach '98 ... Puzzled fans by voluntarily shaving his own head after the match ... Started carrying around a hobby horse named Pepé ... Feuded with Norman Smiley, who tossed Chavo's "friend" into a wood chipper ... Refused to join the red-hot Latino World Order faction, opting instead to take part in General Rection's Misfits in Action ... Competed for a time under the name "Lt. Loco" ... Defeated Daffney for the cruiserweight championship on the June 7 *Thunder* ... Lost the belt to Lance Storm the following month ... Reverted to his original name after the Misfits disbanded ... Regained the cruiserweight title in December, but lost it to Shane Helms at WCW's final pay-per-view ... Debuted for the WWF as part of the Alliance invasion ... Was a trainer for the second *Tough Enough* series ... Wrestled in the company's cruiserweight division in 2002 ... He and Eddie formed the popular "Los Guerreros" tandem that summer ... During their brief run, the pair racked up two WWE tag title wins ... "Chavito" became jealous of his uncle's success as a singles wrestler, turning against him, effectively breaking up the tandem ... Meanwhile, his father, "Chavo Classic," began accompanying him to the ring ... Eddie gained revenge, pinning Chavo at the 2004 Royal Rumble ... Chavo feuded with Rey Mysterio Jr., defeating him for the WWE cruiserweight title at No Way Out ... Lost the belt to Jacqueline after posing an open challenge on the May 6 Smackdown ... Failed to regain the title in a triple threat match, which was won by Chavo Sr. ... Did wear the belt again in February, after winning the "Cruiserweight Open" at No Way Out ... Lost the championship on the March 31 Smackdown, in a battle royal ... Was drafted to the Raw brand, briefly competing as the yuppie-ish, golf cart-driving "Kerwin White" ... Chavo returned to his old self in November, following the death of his Uncle Eddie ... Began using some of Eddie's signature maneuvers in tribute to his late mentor ... Became jealous of Mysterio during Rey's Smackdown title reign ... Interfered in Mysterio's title defense at the Great American Bash, causing him to lose the championship to King Booker ... Pinned Rey at SummerSlam ... Fell to him in a falls-count-anywhere match at No Mercy ... Then, Chavo brutalized Rey in an "I Quit" match on Smackdown, sidelining his former friend with a knee injury ... Feuded with Chris Benoit over the U.S. championship ... Failed to win the title, despite being given several shots and the help of Vickie Guerrero ... Chavo finally wore gold at No Way Out, after once again winning a "Cruiserweight Open" challenge ... Held the division's title until the 2007 Great American Bash, when it was captured by Hornswoggle ... Lost to the returning silver-painted Mysterio at SummerSlam ... Rey gained his revenge in the pair's second "I Quit" match, injuring Chavo's knee and sidelining him for several months ... Chavo returned to action in December, competing for the ECW brand ... Immediately targeted champion, C.M. Punk ... With Edge's help, he earned a shot at and won the ECW title ... Chavo held on to the belt long enough to carry it with him to WrestleMania 24 ... Lost the ECW title at WrestleMania 24 to Kane ... Just when he appeared to have finally made a name for himself in pro wrestling, Chavo fell back down to earth. ☐



Chavo's relationship with his Uncle Eddie was very complex. While he loved and admired Eddie, Chavo's emotions sometimes manifested themselves in a violent manner. In June 1998, Chavo defeated Eddie at the Great American Bash, only to lose a hair-vs.-hair match to his uncle a month later at Bash at the Beach.


CRUISERWEIGHT
CHAMPION

CHAVO GUERRERO JR.

341

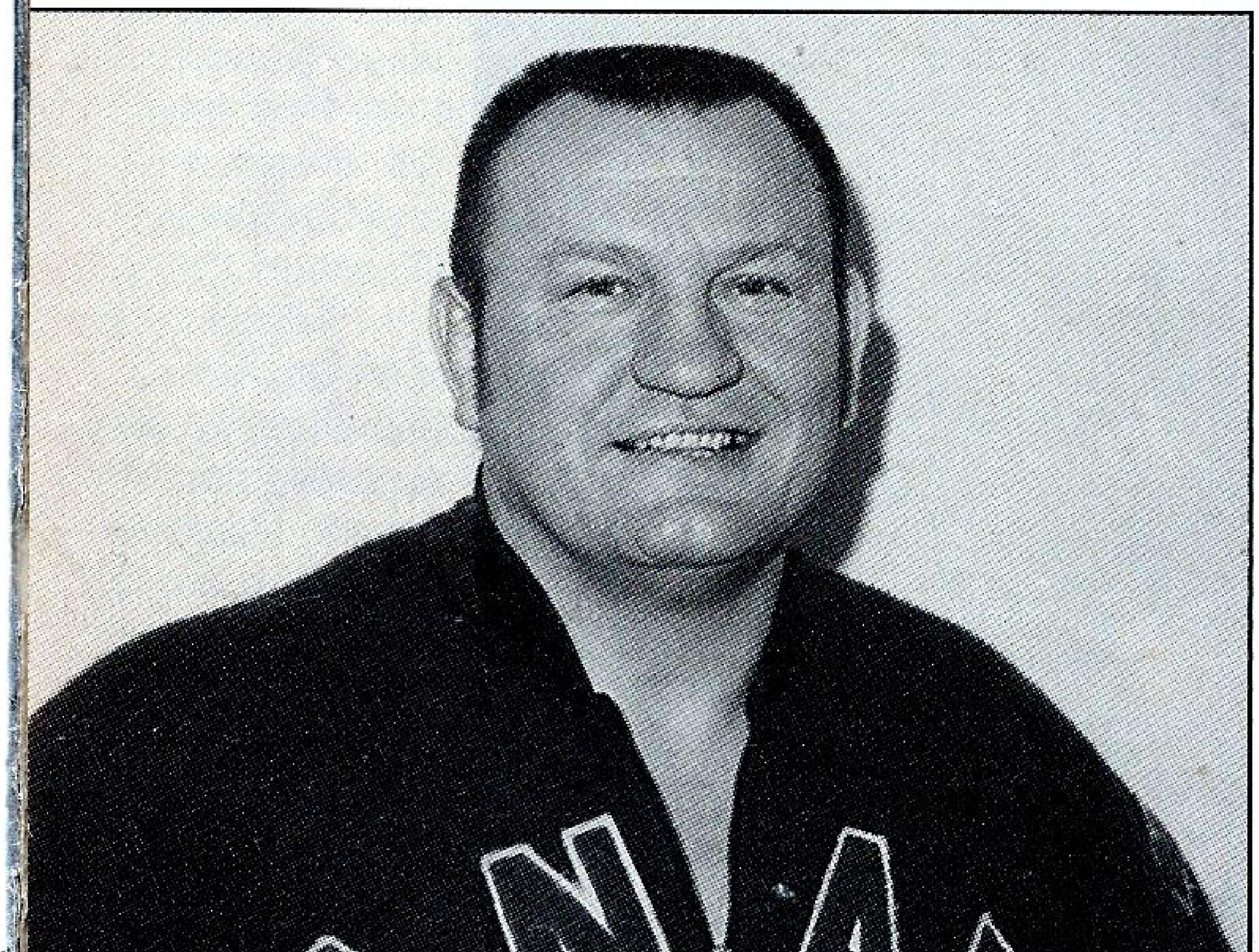
By Mike Lano

GENE KINISKI

ANYONE WHO'S FACED Gene Kiniski in the ring knows dealing with the former AWA and NWA champion was always a full-contact job. Despite being schooled in the science of wrestling, Kiniski, a former college and Canadian Football League standout, preferred a rough, straight-ahead brand of combat.

With a 6'4", 265-pound frame and a history of collapsing offensive lines from the defensive position, it's no wonder Kiniski made the most of his physical approach to wrestling. Just the sound of "Big Thunder's" voice used to make bystanders uneasy.

But time has a way of mellowing even the most hardscrabble souls, and Kiniski is no exception. These days, Kiniski no longer derives pleasure from hearing his opponents' vertebrae crackle, nor the camaraderie of piling into a car with his colleagues for an extended road trip, or even hunting.



Instead, Kiniski opts for the tranquility of hiking, where he can quietly observe nature. "I don't shoot animals anymore," he said. "I just appreciate them."

Or, he revels in the warmth of his family's company. "Spending time with my family is most important to me now," Kiniski says.

That's quite a change for the man who punched, pounded, and clawed his way to a three-year NWA World title reign. Then again, when you put your body through as many rigors as Kiniski did, for as long as he did, you've certainly earned a respite.

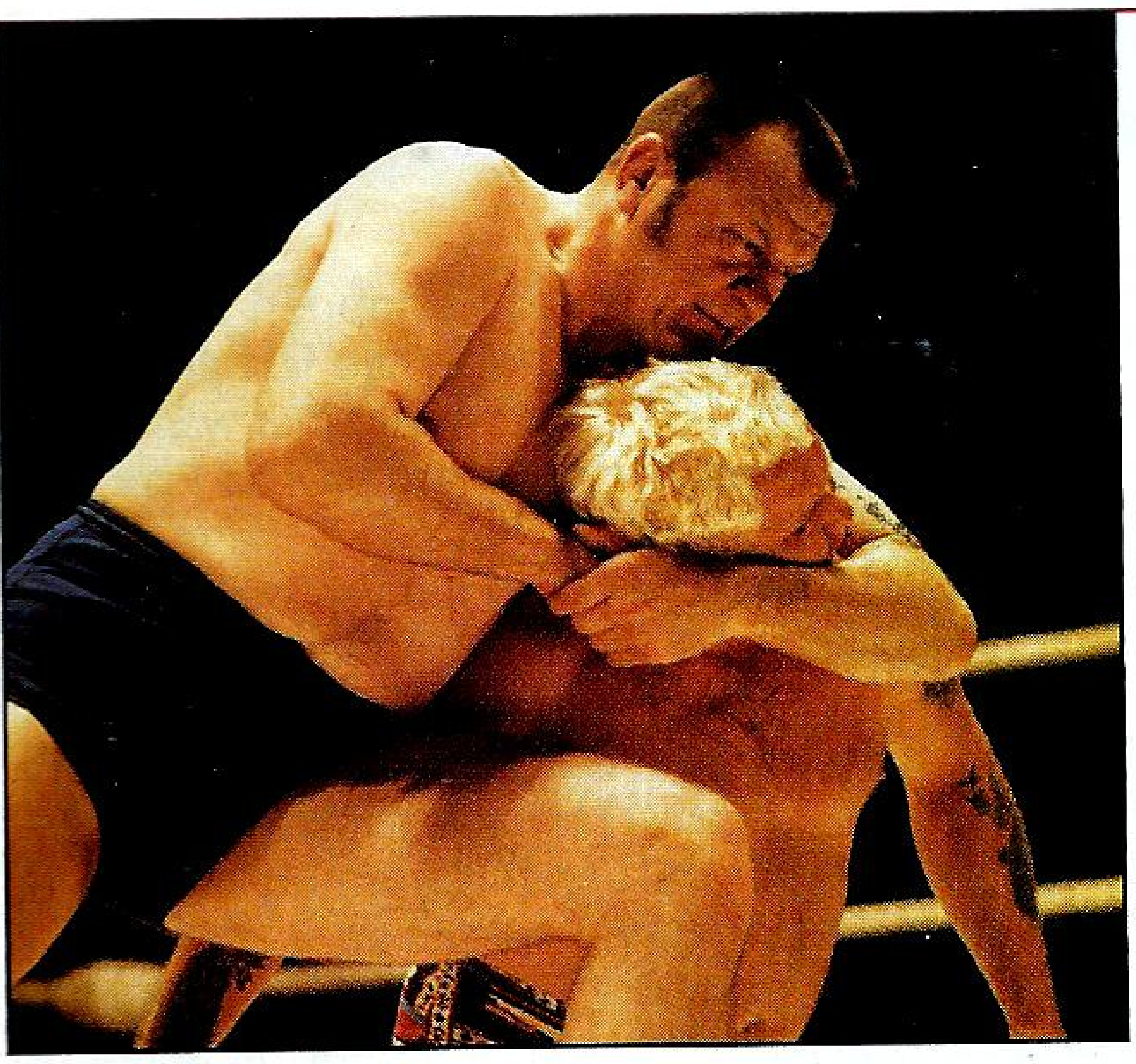
At 79, sore and aching from a lifetime of contact sports, not to mention the miles of travel (Kiniski logged 47 round-trips to Japan alone!), Kiniski enjoys the slower lifestyle. But he's not ready for the rocking chair quite yet. His typical day is that of a retiree: well-rested mornings, a nice cold shower, a cup of coffee, catching up on the world news.

"And my workouts," he said. "I call them my physical therapy, plus stretching and all my different exercises, sometimes swimming or running. My doc thinks my mind and ticker are perfect—like a 20-year-old in a 79-year-old's body. To ensure that, I change up my workout every day, and my TV's always on CNN so I can be the world champ of current events!"

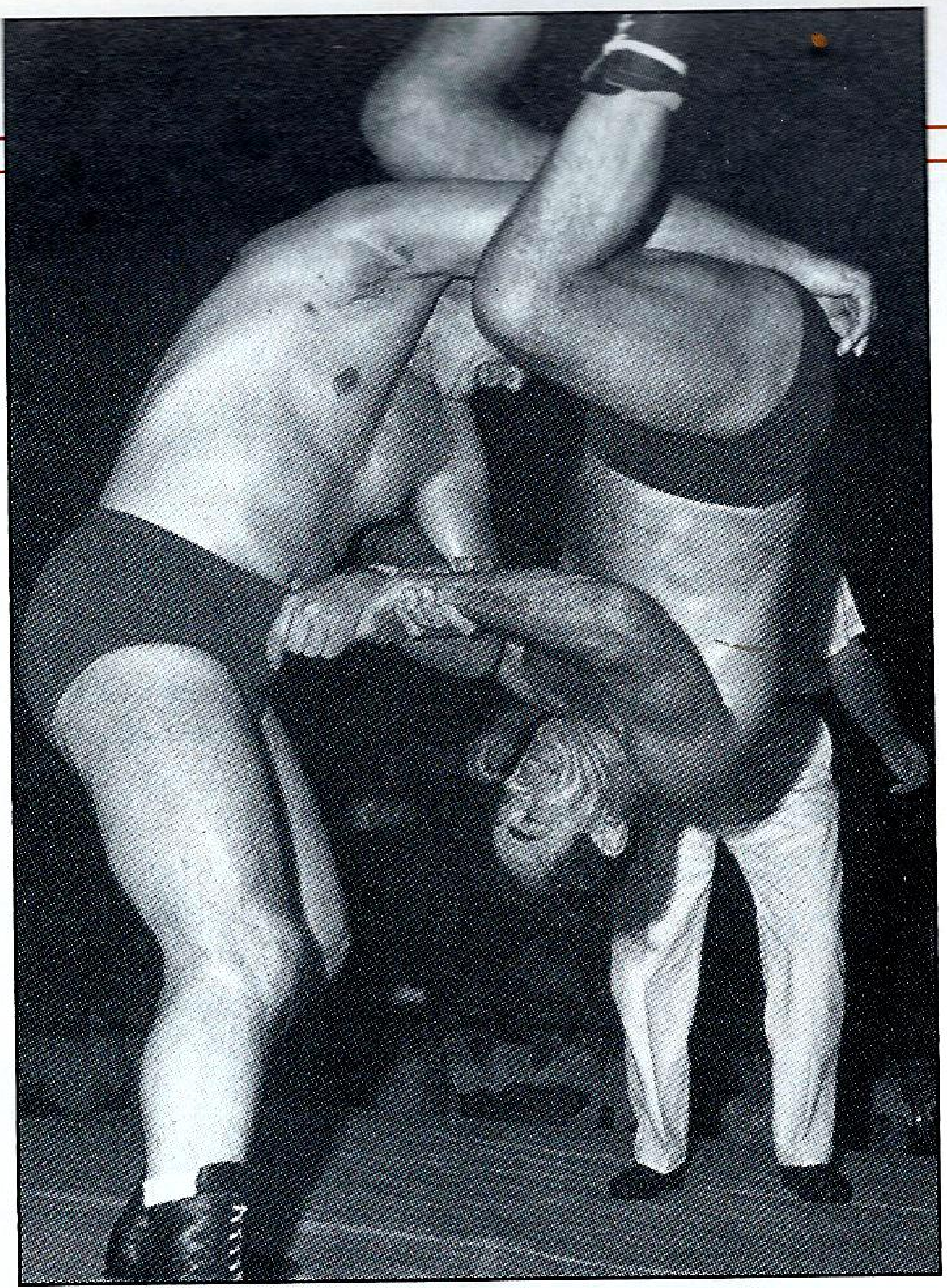
One current event that hit too close to home for Kiniski was the tragedy of fellow Canadian Chris Benoit. "My heart broke there for everyone involved," he said. "The oldest disease on Earth is deceiving oneself. Drugs really have a negative emotional effect. I was always all natural—a big, raw-boned guy. Today, smaller guys may feel forced to blow up. If a guy's 5'8", he feels pressured to get big. You can look at their faces and know who's messed up. Drugs and concussions eventually ruined Benoit. A fantastic, dedicated wrestler. Heartbreaking."

Perhaps having two sons of his own who were once in the business deepened Kiniski's sadness. Of Gene's sons who wrestled, Kelly now has a construction business and Nick runs Kiniski's Reef Tavern in Point Roberts, Washington. "Everyone there is treated Kiniski-first-class!" the proud father hypes.

Kiniski also keeps up with the sport he still loves. "Wrestling is still one of America's greatest art-form contributions to the world, along with jazz," he said. "But the moves now, of course, are all different. Many are high-risk without making a lot of sense, psychology-wise. The



Kiniski locks up with another legendary NWA champion, Harley Race. "Big Thunder" won many matches and titles, as well as the admiration of his opponents. NWA legends such as Race, Jack Brisco, the Funks, and Ric Flair all expressed admiration for his skill and toughness.



Among his accomplishments, Kiniski lists winning the NWA belt from friend Lou Thesz as number one. Nobody expected Kiniski to defeat Thesz, and he used the next three years to prove the win was anything but a fluke.

pacing is far different, too. And because it's a completely different beast, distinguishing who was better than whom from the eras is like comparing opera stars to punk rockers. It's two separate and very distinct things. You can't really say how a Kurt Angle would do against a Dick Hutton. Two different times; two completely different styles."

Unlike some former greats who turn their noses up at the current product, Kiniski is more even-handed. While he acknowledges that Vince McMahon has made some profitable changes to the business, he thinks he sometimes goes too far. But no matter what the current games brings, Kiniski's memories of *his* era remain a source of happiness and pride.

One of six children born to Edmonton alderman Julia Kiniski, Kiniski wrestled as an AAU amateur champion at the University of Arizona in the early-1950s and later broke in as a pro in Tucson after being recruited by promoter Rod Fenton. Gene also played professional football for the Edmonton Eskimos of the CFL, but retired after tearing his kneecap in 1953. That's when he became a full-time wrestler.

During his career, Kiniski traded the AWA World title with Verne Gagne in 1961. In 1966, he defeated friend and NWA World champion Lou Thesz. It was an honor Kiniski still recalls proudly. "That was really something special and incredible, and taking it from the very best," he said.

He would hold the title until 1969, when Dory Funk Jr. wrested it from him with a spinning toehold in Tampa, Florida. Kiniski also won several other titles throughout the 1970s and honed a reputation for skill and toughness in the ring. The Funks, the Briscos, Harley Race, and Ric Flair all consider Gene Kiniski to have been one of their most difficult opponents.

Kiniski, a charter inductee of the *Wrestling Observer* Hall of Fame, retired at 64 with his last match on Winnipeg TV in 1994. But he still appreciates the great friends he acquired during his in-ring career, and misses the camaraderie of their days on the road. "I still enjoy talking to longtime friends, like my former world championship tag team partner Lord Blears, John Tolos, Bob Geigel. Wrestling lost much of that road trip brotherhood and fun we used to have, driving everywhere together."

Despite a long career, a happy retirement, and successful sons, Kiniski still did not accomplish *all* of his goals. His biggest regret is not wrestling Rikidozan in Japan. "Riki and I got to fight before he died, but only in California and Hawaii rings."

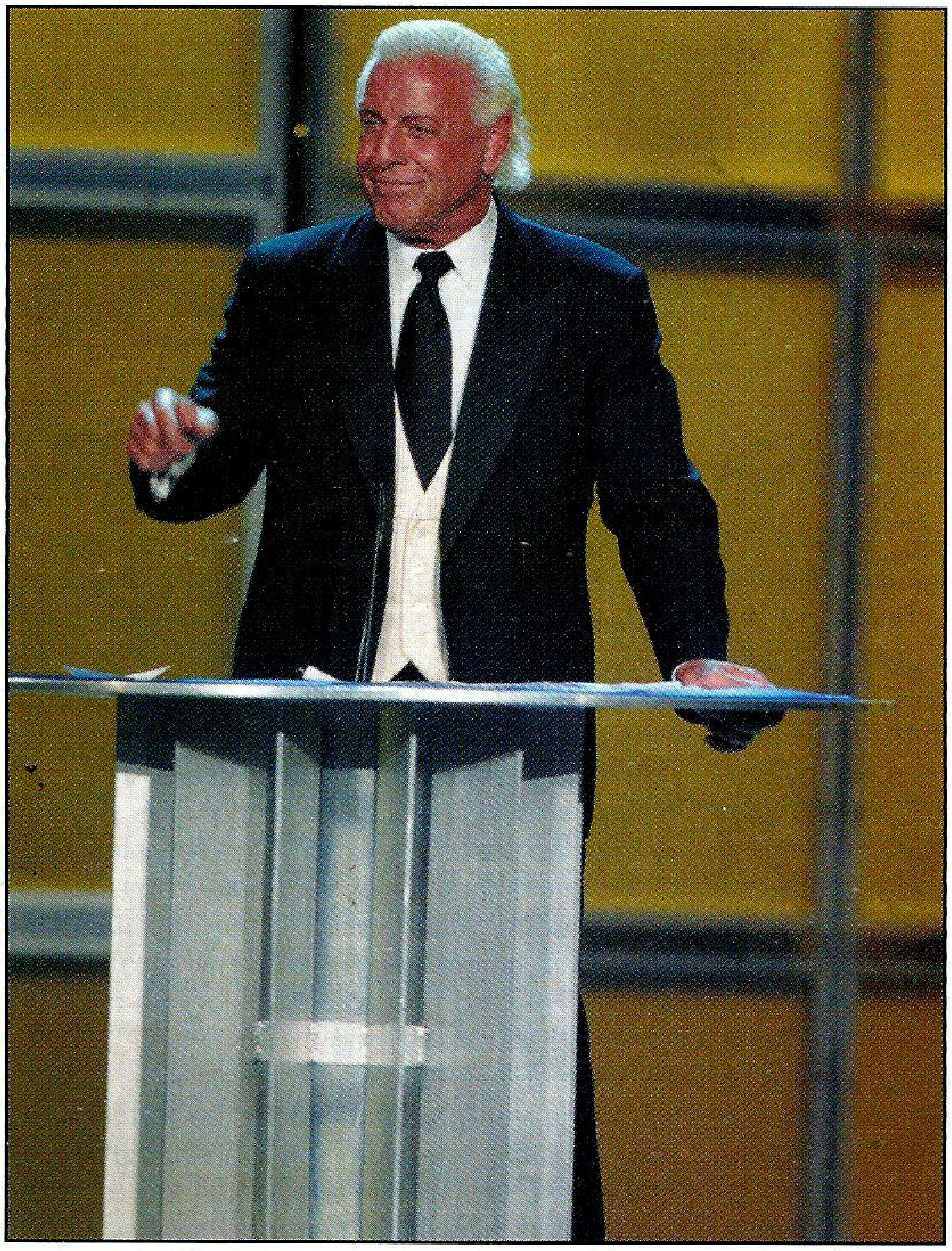
Still, for Gene Kiniski, all the positives far outweigh this lone negative. "I had a helluva time all the years I wrestled," he said. "I wouldn't trade a second of all the fun I had. I'd like to think that even when they booed, the fans appreciated my work in the ring. I felt blessed to get into pro wrestling and I enjoyed it daily." □

plain speaking

With Matt Brock

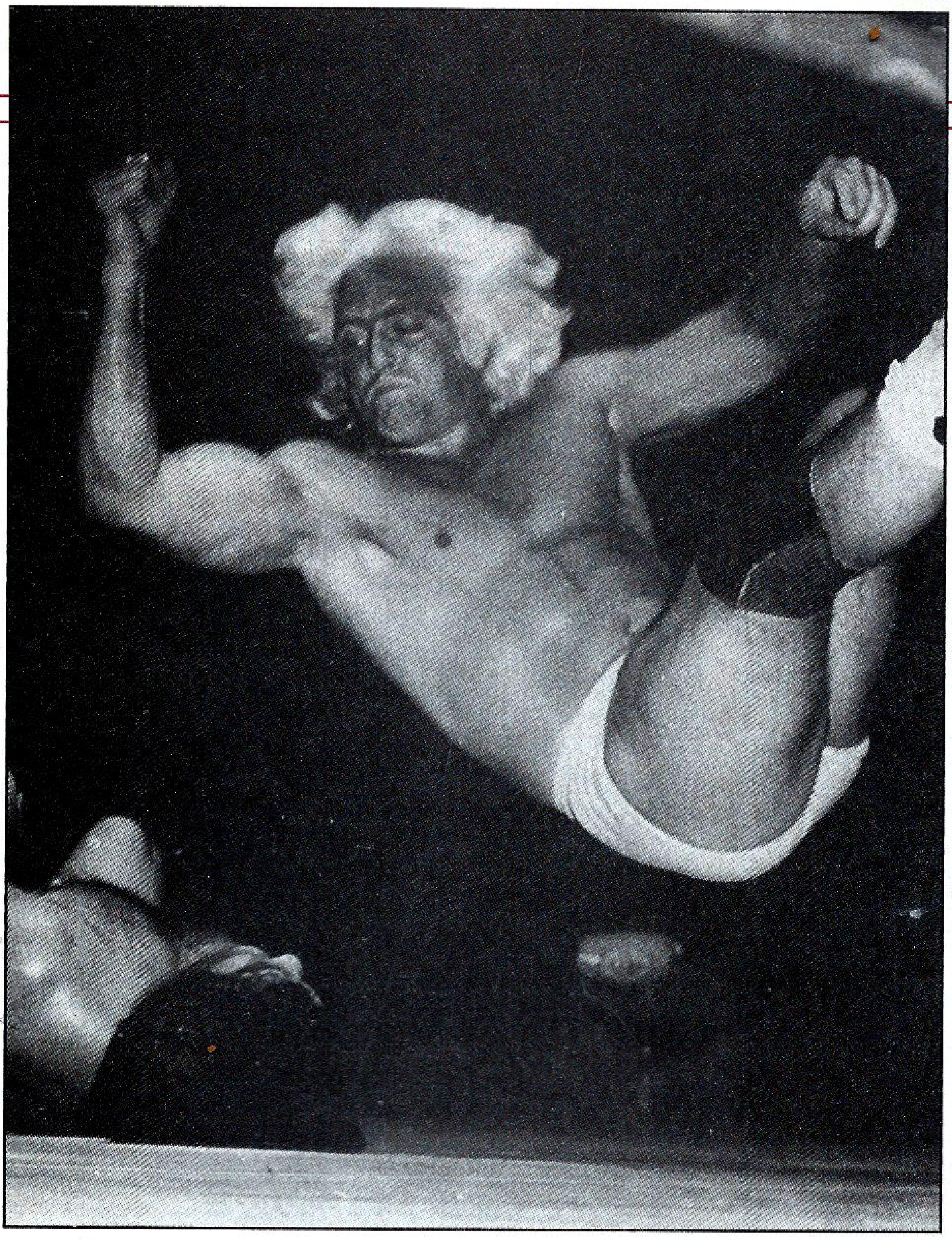
Harder than nails, veteran wrestling reporter Matt Brock has logged more miles covering wrestling than any other journalist. Every month Matt will travel to the sport's hotbeds, reporting everything he sees without fear or favor

ORLANDO, FL: If that really was Ric Flair's final match at WrestleMania 24, then the idea that he went out with honor seems to this reporter to be a bit misguided. Here's one of the greatest wrestlers in the history of our sport, perhaps the greatest (a lot of men belong in this conversation), and he went out with a loss. Sure, it was a great match, and losing to Shawn Michaels is nothing to be embarrassed about. And if you want to know the truth, yeah, this reporter got a little misty-eyed after the match too, which doesn't happen too often. Can't remember the last time it did happen. And, yeah, that was a nice reaction the crowd gave to Flair after the match. But this is the truth, and you can deny it if you want, but you have to face it: A man like Ric Flair doesn't go out with a loss. ¶His first mistake was calling his match against Michaels a retirement match, or career-threatening match, or whatever he called it, because a man like Ric Flair doesn't take that chance with a career he spent 38 years building. A man like Ric Flair doesn't roll the dice after so many accomplishments. A man like Ric Flair says, "I'm going out on *my* terms, when *I* feel like it, because that's what my entire career has been about: Doing things on *my* terms, when *I* want to do them." ¶So you can say all you want about what a great match it was, although for my money, it didn't stand up to the classic Flair-Streamboat marathons of the late-1980s (which, by the way, Flair usually won). But when I think back on the career of Ric Flair, I don't want the first image that comes to my mind to be him on his back, taking the three-count, and then crying all the way back to the dressing room. That's not my Ric Flair.



RIC FLAIR AT HOF

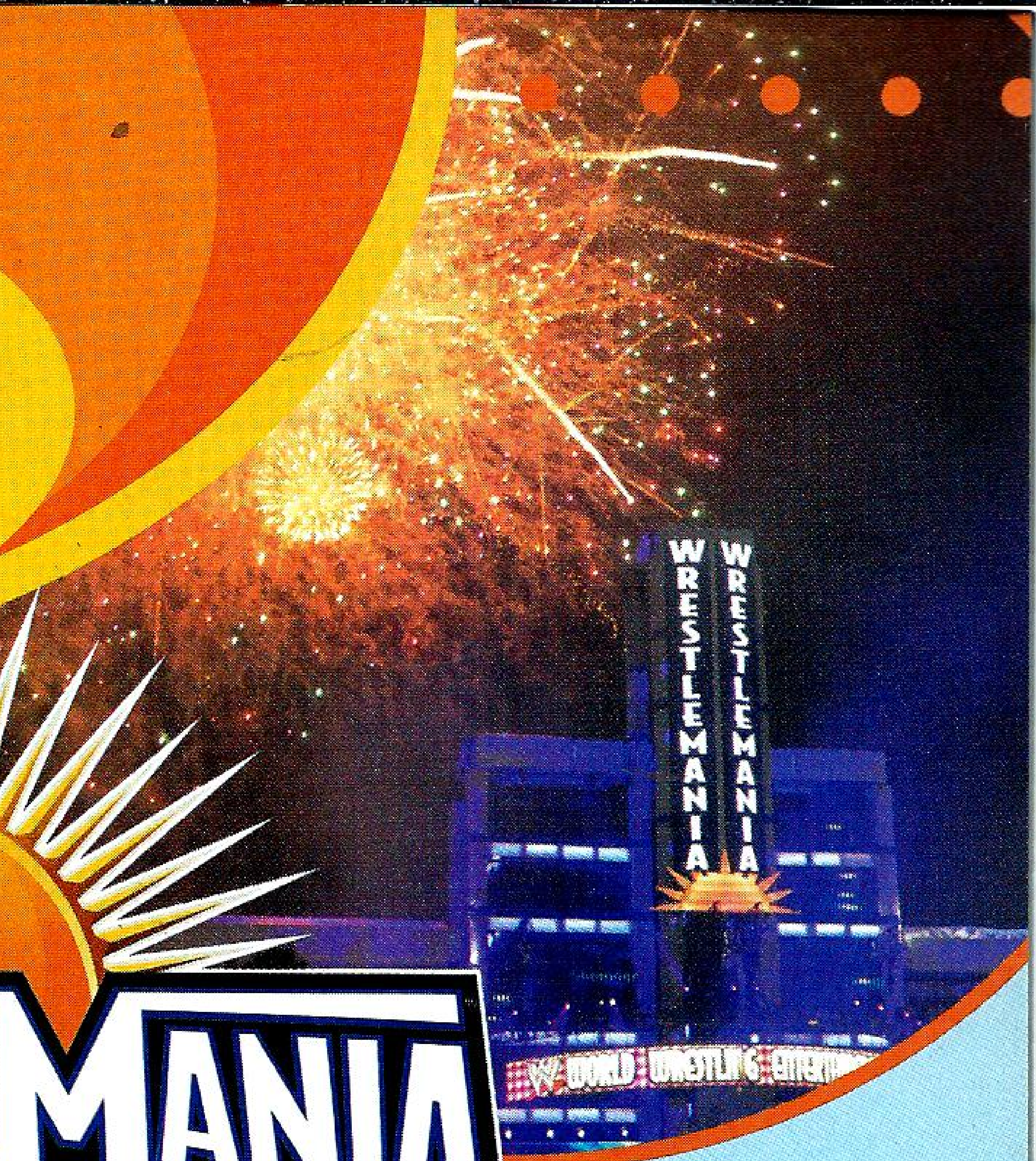
ORLANDO, FL: If you really care about this sport, you weren't going anywhere until this whole Ric Flair retirement thing was settled. Now, I hate to be negative about this whole thing again, but I've been paid to write what's on my mind, and this is what was on my mind the whole night at Raw: Orlando, Florida, was not the right place for the Ric Flair retirement ceremony. Atlanta. Maybe somewhere in North Carolina. Not Orlando, a place where I'm sure some of Flair's greatest moments took place (you'd be hard-pressed to find a major city where they didn't), but it is not a place often associated with Flair (unless, of course, they held the retirement ceremony at Space Mountain, which they didn't). ¶Dusty Rhodes wasn't there (he was attending a funeral, from what I heard), but he did tape his comments, saying, "There are legends, there are icons, but from this day forth, Ric Flair is a national treasure." Somehow, Rhodes praising Flair will always seem out of place. Then Flair said, "I'm not sad about not wrestling. You should rejoice in the fact that I have had the greatest career in the history of pro wrestling." Maybe. Maybe not. That's up for debate, but like I said, Flair is definitely in the debate. The crowd cheered. And then Arn Anderson and Tully Blanchard came out, which was about as apt a tribute as you could ever imagine. They flashed four fingers and walked down the aisle together, and for the second time in two nights, this reporter got a little misty-eyed. Really, this has gotta stop.


RIC FLAIR vs. RICKY STEAMBOAT

ATLANTA, GA: My plane made a stopover here on the way back to New York, so with seats available on a flight later in the day, I decided to take a little detour and walk around downtown Atlanta, one of the places that meant a lot in the career of Ric Flair. The Omni isn't here anymore, but TBS and its studios still are, and if you just limited your assessment of Flair's career to those two places, it would still be something to marvel at. ¶I recently saw a list of Flair's greatest matches, and the author included such gems as his "I Quit" match against Terry Funk and some matches against Sting and Shawn Michaels. Well, maybe I'm old-fashioned, but to me, Flair will always be a product of the NWA/WCW, or maybe it's better said that the NWA/WCW were products of Flair, because he brought them alive. ¶So, yes, I'd have that Funk match on my list, and I'd also have all of his matches against Rick Steamboat and Dusty Rhodes on the list, and there was also a great cage match against Harley Race. Of course, WWE doesn't want to hear this. They want to believe that they had the best of Flair. But they didn't. They can't have everything.

NEW YORK, NY: Back home after what turned out to be an emotional week. Personal issues seem irrelevant. Another great wrestler has passed through my life, supposedly to never wrestle again. So where do I stand? Rogers, Thesz, Sammartino, Race, Rhodes, Flair. They've all come and gone, had their careers, retired. What about an old scribe named Brock? Where does he go from here? Back on the road? Back into a sport he barely recognizes anymore. ¶Hate to make this personal, readers, but when a man like Flair retires, we all feel a little mortal. If him, why not me? For now, I'm not going anywhere. Wrestling is the only life I've known for going on 50 years now. But it's something to think about. Eventually, the end will come. ☐

Exclusive Analysis!



WRESTLEMANIA 24:
The Real Winners & Losers

Text by Dan Murphy
Photos by George Napolitano

WRESTLEMANIA 24 SHATTERED attendance records and, once the final figures come in, may be the most profitable pro wrestling card of all-time. It was a night that saw one of the sport's most lauded careers come to an end, an unparalleled winning streak continue, the so-called "best fighter on earth" defeat the so-called "largest athlete on earth," and a third-generation superstar barely retain his World title.

There were nine matches on the pay-per-view telecast and one battle royal that took place before the PPV event began, but it aired exclusively on wwe.com.

Every match has a winner and a loser, but the matches that take place at WrestleMania tend to have ripple effects that set the stage for the matches we will be seeing throughout the summer. For example, Shawn Michaels did exactly what Ric Flair asked. He brought his "A game" to WrestleMania and ended Flair's career with some sweet chin music. But Michaels' win had an unintended effect in angering Batista, who felt Michaels should have thrown the match to give the "Nature Boy" one final win. Now the simmering animosity between Michaels and Batista—two of Flair's closest friends—threatens to explode, and may result in one of the summer's biggest feuds.

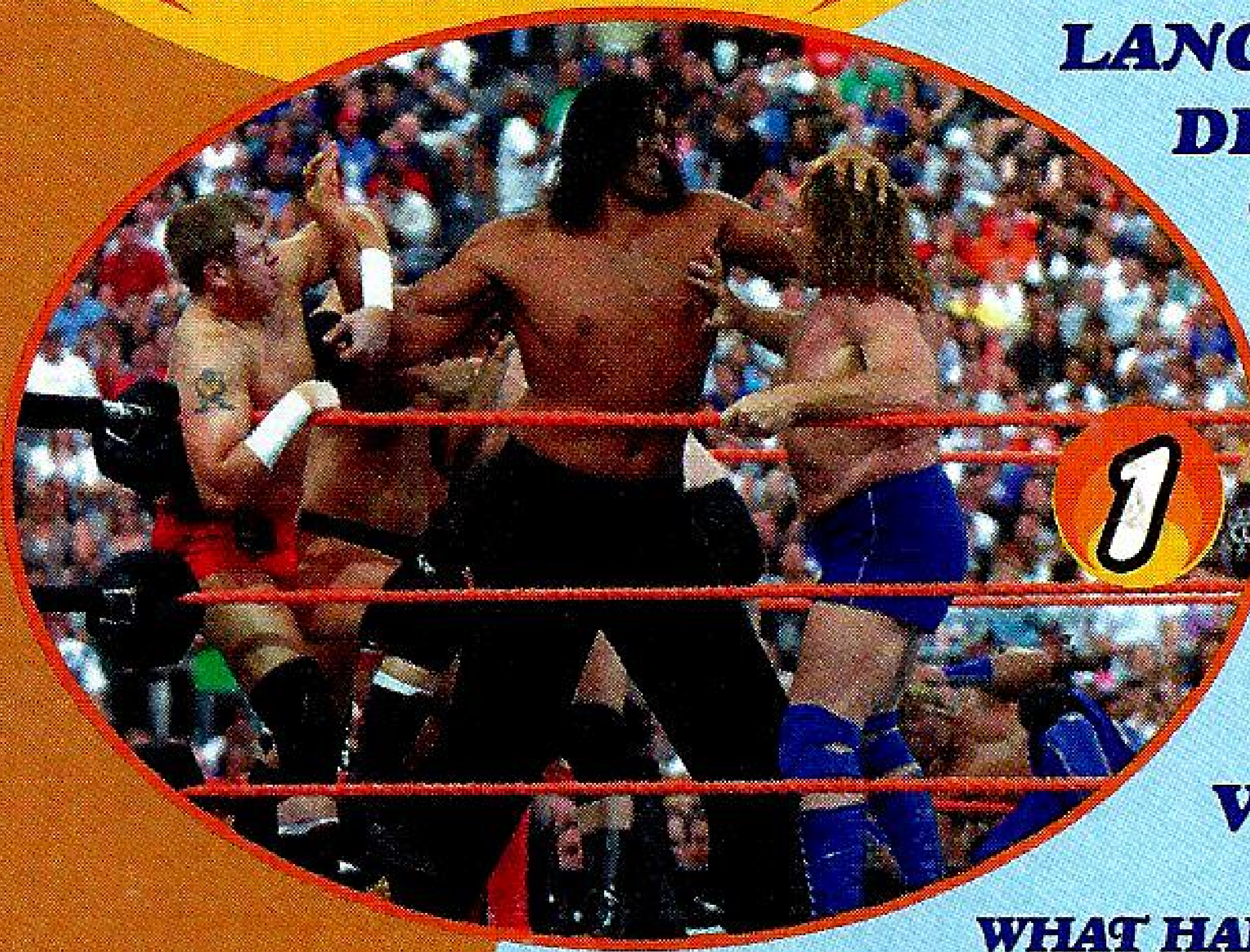
In this exclusive section, we review the 10 matches that took place on March 30, 2008, as well as the WWE Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony winners from the previous night. We recap the in-ring action and who won each match. Then we go a step further and examine the big picture to identify the "real" winner and "real" loser of each match.

Sometimes the "real" winners and "real" losers are obvious; sometimes the winners and losers are individuals not at all connected to the match itself, but whose fortunes were dramatically affected by the results of WrestleMania 24.

Join us as we look back on one of the biggest and most spectacular cards in wrestling history, and take a good look at the men and women we identified as the true winners and losers of WrestleMania.

PRE-SHOW MATCH:

KANE *vs.* MARK HENRY *vs.* ELIJAH BURKE *vs.* LANCE CADE *vs.* DEUCE *vs.* DOMINO *vs.* TOMMY DREAMER *vs.* JIM DUGGAN *vs.* FESTUS *vs.* THE GREAT KHALI *vs.* HARDCORE HOLLY *vs.* JESSE *vs.* BRIAN KENDRICK *vs.* KOFI KINGSTON *vs.* THE MIZ *vs.* SHANNON MOORE *vs.* TREVOR MURDOCH *vs.* JAMIE NOBLE *vs.* CHUCK PALUMBO *vs.* CODY RHODES *vs.* SNITSKY *vs.* STEVIE RICHARDS *vs.* JIMMY WANG YANG *vs.* VAL VENIS *(interpromotional battle royal)*



1. The Great Khali, whaling away on Jim Duggan, was a favorite to win the interpromotional battle royal. But he was outlasted by another big man, Kane, who earned a shot at the ECW title with the victory.

2. It took Kane all of nine seconds to chokeslam Chavo Guerrero Jr. and pin him for the ECW championship. Kane surprised Guerrero by emerging from the crowd and entering the ring behind him.

WHAT HAPPENED: Twenty-four WWE superstars took part in the battle royal with an ECW title shot to be awarded to the winner later in the evening.

While there may have been 24 men in the ring when the bell sounded, it was really a five-man battle among The Great Khali, Mark Henry, Kane, Chuck Palumbo, and Snitsky. Those five were responsible for every single elimination in the match (with the exception of Brian Kendrick, who eliminated himself with a suicide dive to the floor).

Jamie Noble had one of the most innovative attempts to stave off elimination by landing on the back of Kofi Kingston after being tossed over the top rope, and then climbing over other eliminated wrestlers without touching the floor to get back onto the apron. Unfortunately, his nemesis Palumbo was waiting for him and kicked him back to the floor.

Snitsky, Henry, and Kane got an assist from Bob Holly to dump Khali out of the ring, leaving them as the final four wrestlers in the match. Henry quickly eliminated Holly and then tossed Snitsky, leaving Kane and Henry to trade the heavy lumber in the center of the ring. Kane landed a big uppercut that sent Henry reeling right over the top rope to win the match.

THE WINNER: Kane

THE REAL WINNER: Kane. The last time Kane held a major singles title was in 1998, when he held the WWF World title for one day. His win gave him another opportunity for championship gold.

THE REAL LOSER: Tommy Dreamer. The sentimental favorite barely played a role in the bout. At no point was he ever in position to regain the title he held for less than 20 minutes back on April 22, 2000.

ANOTHER LOSER: Colin Delaney. At least Dreamer was in the match. Despite a heavy push on ECW TV, Colin couldn't even get on the pre-show.

MATCH:

CHAVO GUERRERO *vs.* KANE *(ECW title match)*

WHAT HAPPENED: If you blinked, you missed the whole thing. In the most lopsided title change since The Ultimate Warrior's 1988 drubbing of The Honky Tonk Man, Kane snuck into the ring and connected with a chokeslam to relieve Guerrero of the ECW title.

Perhaps still fatigued from the battle royal earlier in the night, Kane didn't want to waste any time and surprised Guerrero by entering the ring through the crowd while Chavo was focused on watching the entrance ramp. By the time Guerrero realized the "Big Red Machine" was in the ring, Kane's big right hand had already closed around his throat. Three seconds later, the match was over.

THE WINNER: Kane by pinfall in nine seconds.

THE REAL WINNER: The ECW brand. No offense to Guerrero, but he always seemed in over his head as ECW champion. Heck, Colin Delaney actually scored a two-count on him! His reign was mediocre at best and boring at worst. The ECW brand needed a change at the top and Kane promises to inject some much-needed excitement into the moribund extreme brand.

THE REAL LOSER: The legacy of ECW. It may not have been as bad as Vince McMahon holding the ECW title, but the first defense of the ECW championship on the WrestleMania stage was a joke of a match and a disgrace to the ECW initials.

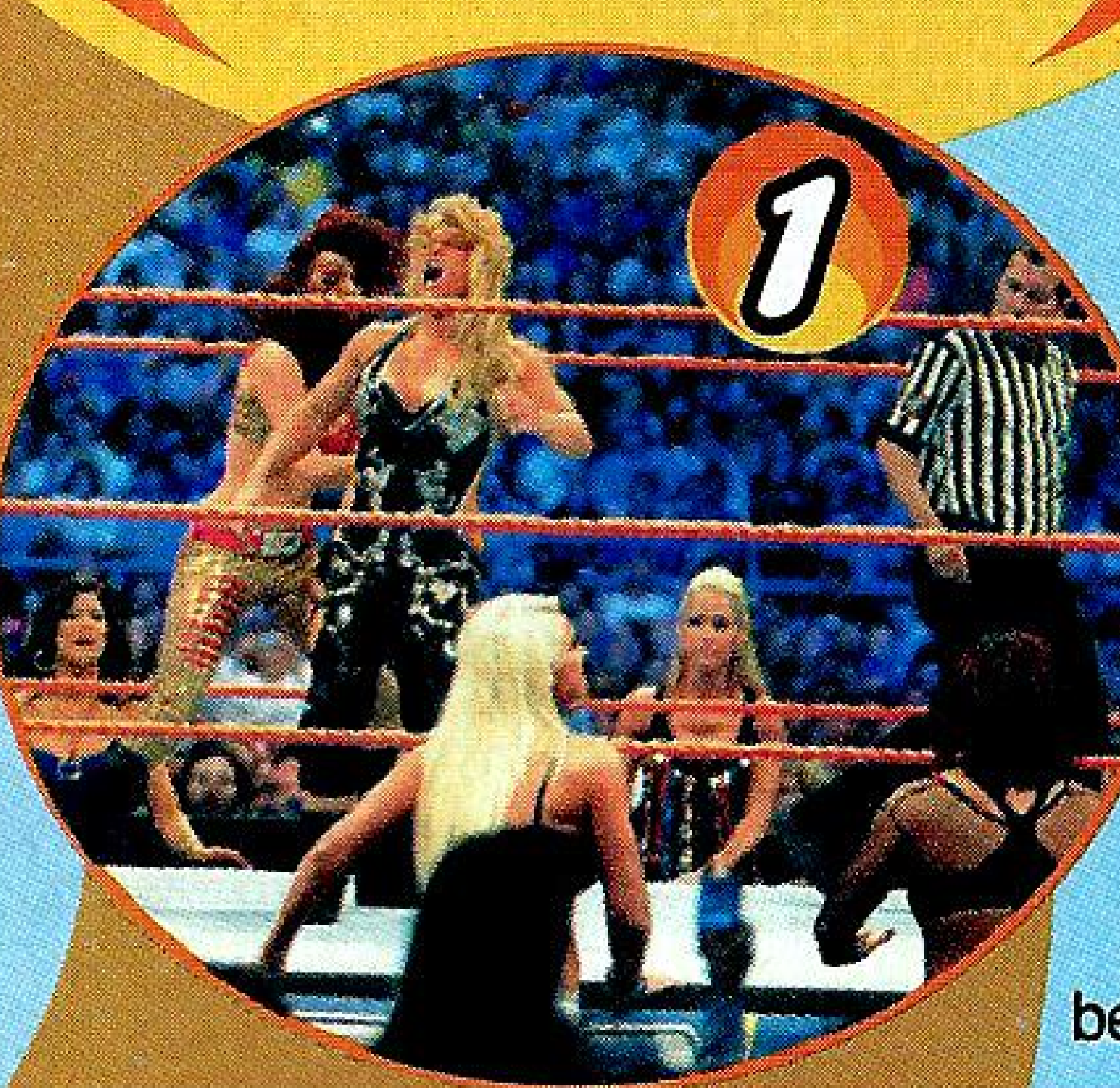
ANOTHER LOSER: Chavo Guerrero. When fans look back on Guerrero's reign, it won't be his wins over C.M. Punk and Tommy Dreamer they remember; it will be those nine awful seconds in Orlando.

ONE MORE LOSER: Rey Mysterio Jr. He'd probably never admit it, but we've got to believe a small part of Rey was hoping Chavo would still have the ECW title when he returned from his injury. Rey would have made a great ECW champion.

MATCH:

BETH PHOENIX & MELINA vs. ASHLEY MASSARO & MARIA KANELLIS

("Playboy BunnyMania" match)



WHAT HAPPENED: The Divas had the unenviable task of following one of the most emotional matches in WrestleMania history. And, if that wasn't bad enough, they also had to wrestle through a brief power failure that caused the lights to go out in the Citrus Bowl.

The two *Playboy* covergirls got off to a quick start, with Maria throwing Melina to the floor, where she was unceremoniously thrown back into the ring by the women surrounding it. Enraged at the sight of Santino Marella at ringside, Maria seemed especially driven, getting solid shots in on both Melina and Phoenix and connecting with her bronco buster on Melina. Melina nailed Ashley with an impressive moonsault from Phoenix's shoulders right before the lights went out. But Maria surprised "The Glamazon" with an impressive bulldog. When Maria went to cover Phoenix, Marella broke up the count, prompting Jerry Lawler to come to the rescue and drop Marella with a big right hand.

While the drama unfolded on the floor, Phoenix was able to recover and hit Maria with a fisherman's buster to score the pin. After the match, guest emcee Snoop Dogg clotheslined Marella and was rewarded with a passionate kiss from Maria.

THE WINNER: Beth Phoenix and Melina by pinfall in 5:58.

THE REAL WINNER: Snoop Dogg. Hey, it's not every day a guy gets a chance to make out with a *Playboy* covergirl. Well, maybe it is for Snoop Dogg.

ANOTHER WINNER: Santino Marella. Marella may not have had a match at 'Mania, but he still managed to be involved in some of the weekend's most memorable segments, including the backstage vignette with Snoop Dogg and Mick Foley and a hilarious encounter with The Rock during the Hall of Fame ceremony.

THE REAL LOSER: Mickie James. Once again, the woman who stole the show at WrestleMania 22 with her win over Trish Stratus had to settle for being a "lumberjill" instead of competing. At this year's event, Mickie spent another 'Mania watching *Playboy* take the spotlight instead of her.

1. Women's champion Beth Phoenix howls in pain as WWE's latest *Playboy* covergirl clubs her from behind. Maria, who few people expected to give Phoenix and Melina much trouble, nearly scored a three-count on "The Glamazon."

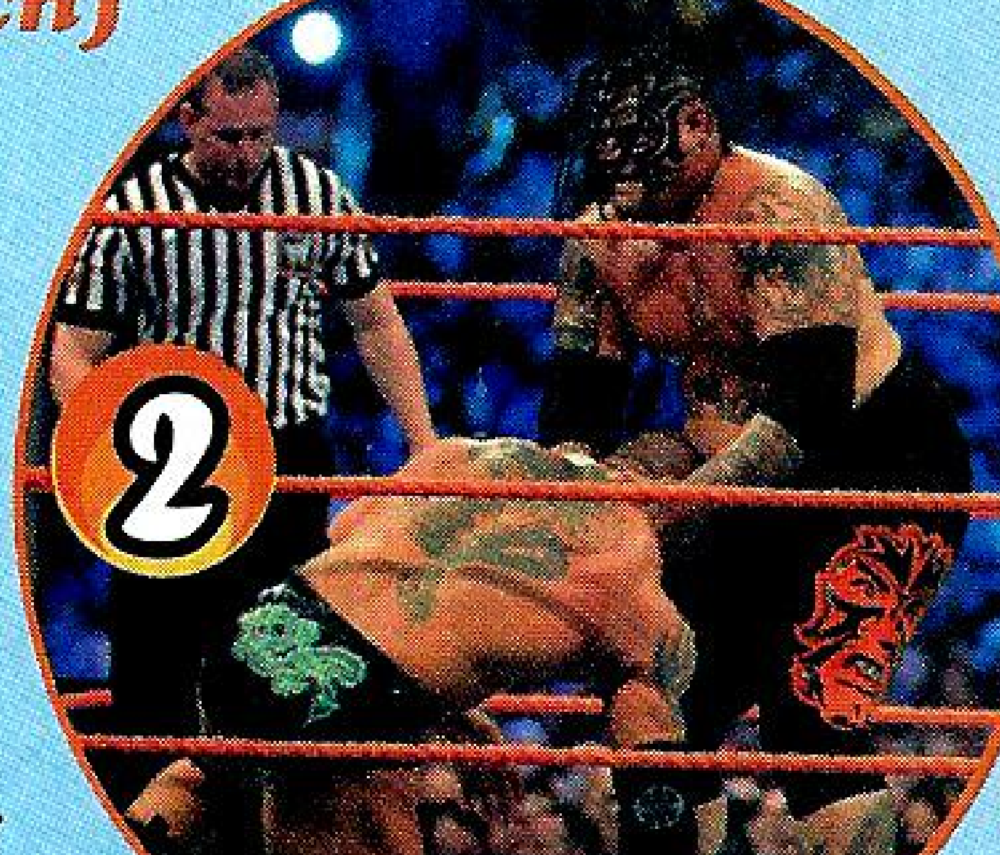
2. Batista's victory over Umaga didn't come easily. The "Samoan Bulldozer" had "The Animal" at his mercy several times, but Batista withstood the punishment and got the win.

3. Maria plants a knee in Melina's face. Though she was ultimately pinned, the former backstage announcer acquitted herself quite well in the ring against Melina and Phoenix.

MATCH:

MATCH: UMAGA vs. BATISTA

("Battle Of The Brands" match)



WHAT HAPPENED: The "Samoan Bulldozer" was surprisingly dominant in this battle for bragging rights between the Raw and Smackdown brands, as Umaga spent the majority of the match battering three-time Smackdown World champion Batista with heavy punches, kicks, and nerve holds.

Batista and Umaga began trading punches as soon as the opening bell sounded. Umaga got the upper hand early, and then flattened "The Animal" with a spinning heel kick. Umaga then kicked Batista squarely in the face, sending him from the ring apron to the floor in a dangerous freefall. Umaga followed up with a big splash and began methodically working on Batista's back, slamming him hard into the corner turnbuckles. Umaga further slowed the pace by clinching a tight nerve hold on Batista's trapezius muscles.

Batista managed to power up to his feet and attempt a bodyslam, but his back gave out and he collapsed under Umaga's 350 pounds. Sensing Batista's weakened state, Umaga landed a big Samoan drop and went for his Samoan Spike, but Batista was able to block the blow. Umaga countered with a headbutt and charged the dazed Smackdown superstar. Batista was able to surprise Umaga with a thundering spinebuster. He then picked the Samoan off the canvas and managed to lift him up into a Batista bomb. Even though "The Animal" collapsed while hitting the move, it proved to be enough to keep Umaga down for the three-count.

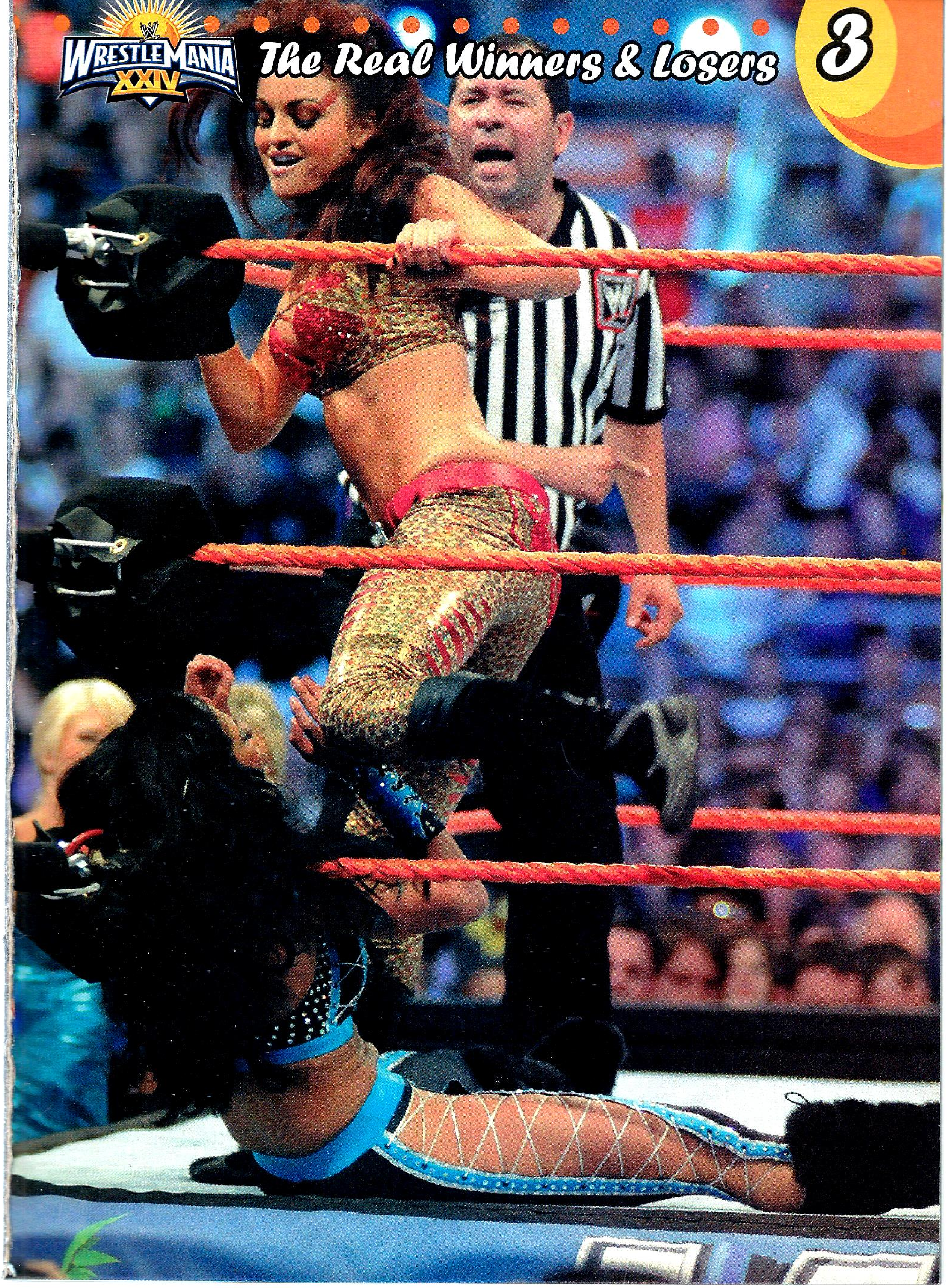
THE WINNER: Batista by pinfall in 7:10.

THE REAL WINNER: The Smackdown brand. For the past several years, the Smackdown brand has been seen as the secondary WWE brand behind the flagship Raw brand. By making short work of Raw's resident man-monster, Batista injected his brand with a dose of credibility.

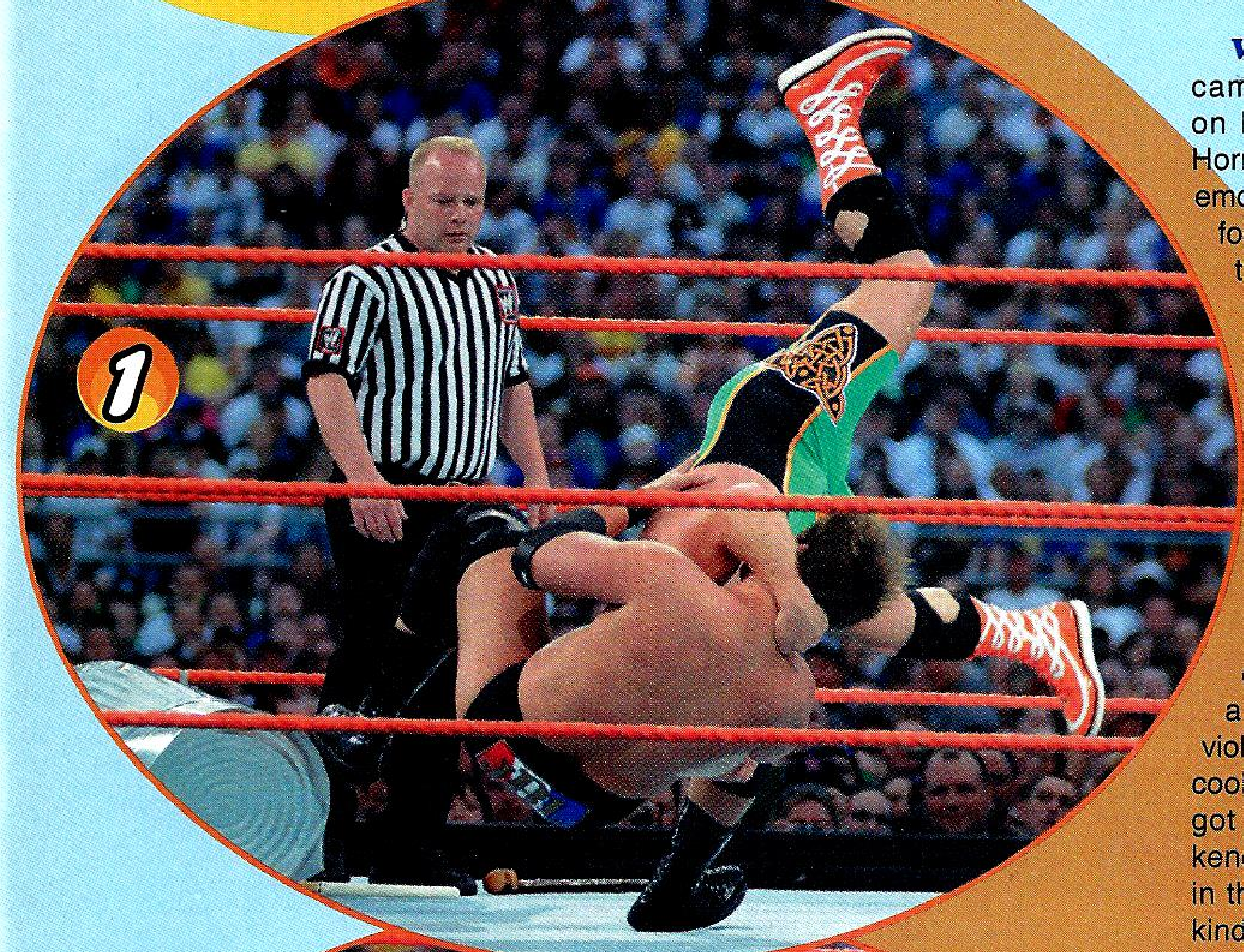
ANOTHER WINNER: Batista. After struggling against The Undertaker in recent months, Batista needed a big win to show he is still a legitimate title contender. He got that big win at WrestleMania.

THE REAL LOSER: Umaga. The big man's aura of invincibility is fading. As recently as the 2007 Royal Rumble, Umaga was a bona fide title contender. This outing won't help his stock at all. He either needs a change of scenery or he needs to find a new manager, pronto.

3



MATCH: JOHN BRADSHAW LAYFIELD vs. FINLAY
("Belfast Brawl" match)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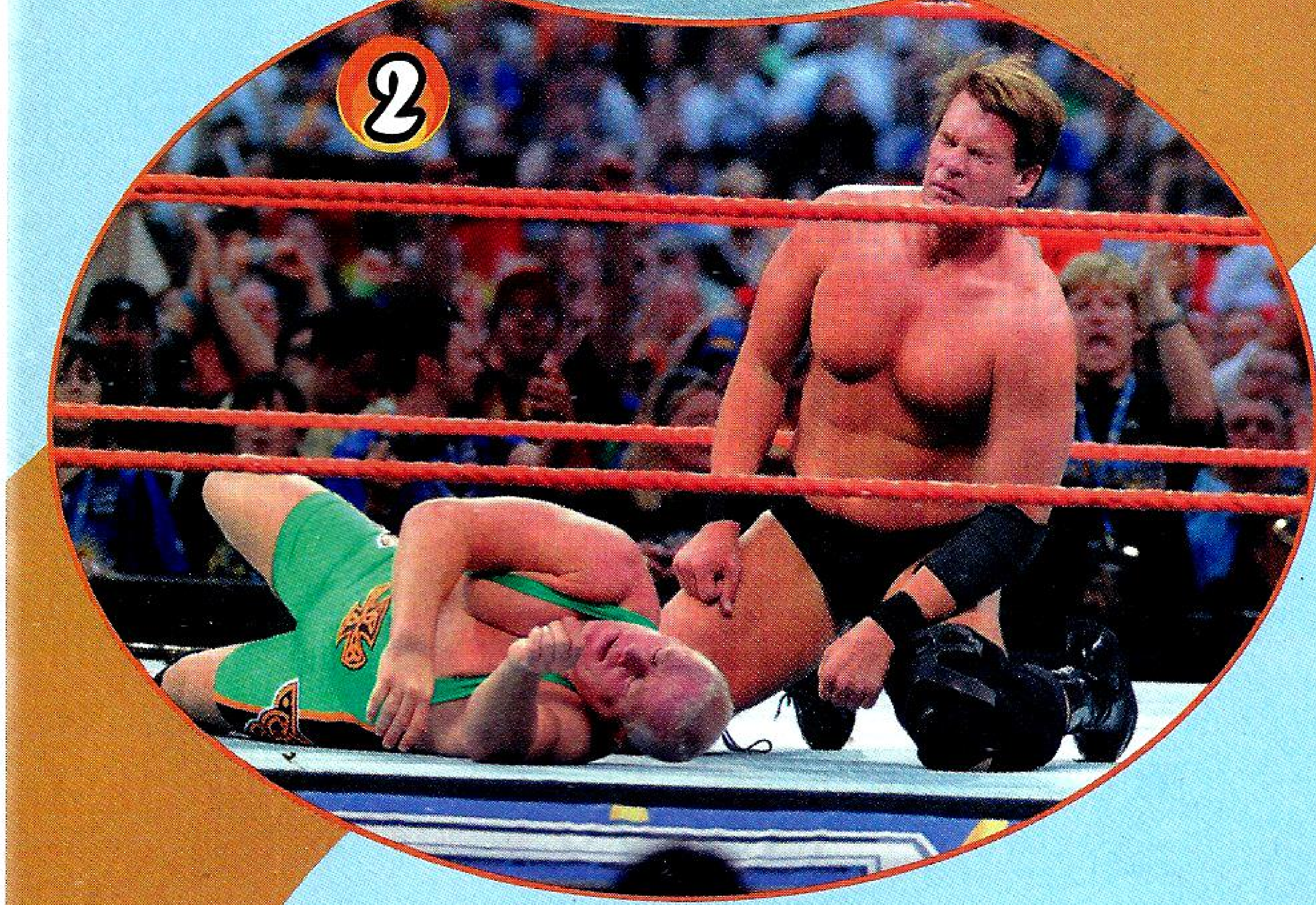
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WHAT HAPPENED: Finlay came into the match with vengeance on his mind, and he brought out little Hornswoggle to give him even more of an emotional boost. JBL, however, was ready for the challenge and was primed to beat the "Belfast Brawler" at his own game.

Layfield immediately attacked Finlay and sent the Irishman careening into the guardrail and the ringsteps. Finlay pulled weapons, such as a garbage can and cookie sheet, from under the ring. JBL battered Finlay with the trashcan and then carried the steps into the ring with the intention of using them when executing a power bomb or piledriver. Finlay countered with a desperation back bodydrop, then violently kicked JBL's face and smashed a cookie sheet over his head. Hornswoggle got in on the fun and nailed JBL with a kendo stick as Finlay propped up a table in the corner, seemingly to deliver some kind of extreme maneuver.

JBL recovered and slapped Hornswoggle. The enraged Finlay responded by slamming JBL's head into the announcers' table. Finlay then went for a high-risk suicide dive, but JBL caught him with a vicious shot with the cookie sheet as he descended. JBL then went for the clothesline from hell, but Finlay countered with a trashcan shot. Finlay hit a standing senton bomb and then slammed JBL through the table in the corner.

Surprisingly, JBL kicked out of the cover. Finlay grabbed the ringsteps to administer the *coup de grâce*, but JBL took out his right knee with the kendo stick and connected with a thunderous clothesline from hell for the win.

THE WINNER: JBL by pinfall in 8:37.

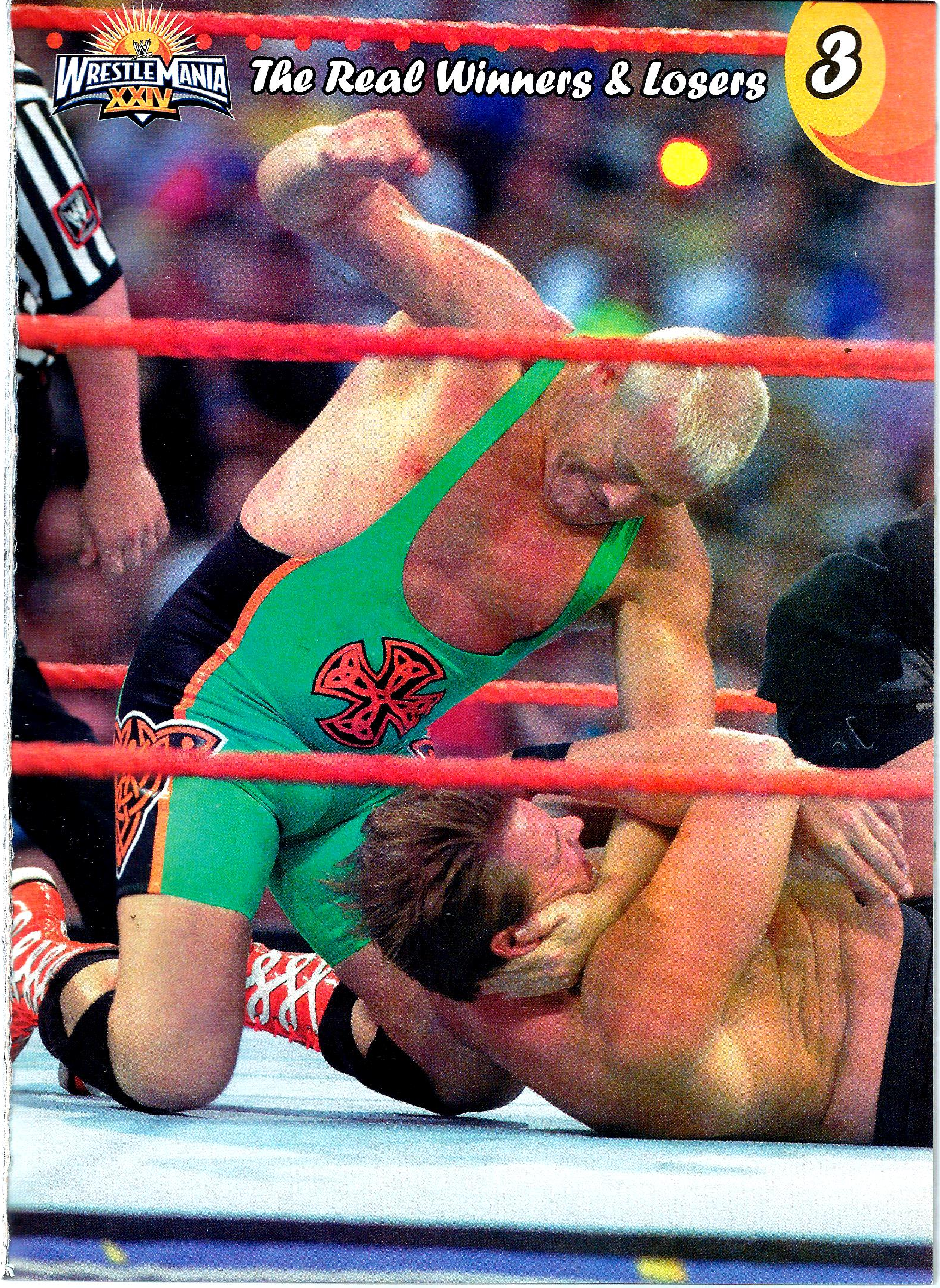
THE REAL WINNER: JBL. Layfield looked confident. With the win, he moved one step closer to World title contention.

THE REAL LOSER: Hornswoggle. The Hollywood ending of this match would have seen the returning leprechaun get his revenge on JBL for exposing the McMahon paternity hoax and injuring Hornswoggle weeks earlier on Raw. Instead, Finlay lost the match and Hornswoggle was further humiliated when JBL impudently threw a garbage can onto him and slapped him. Hornswoggle's future in WWE looks cloudy.

1. Though the match was dubbed a "Belfast Brawl," Finlay and JBL actually threw in a few basic wrestling maneuvers. Still, the match featured more fighting than grappling.

2. Neither JBL nor Finlay passed on the chance to punish each other, and their faces show the wear and tear. Defense was virtually non-existent in this match.

3. Finlay may be getting the better of JBL in this exchange, but in the end, JBL out-slugged, outwrestled, and outlasted the "Belfast Brawler."

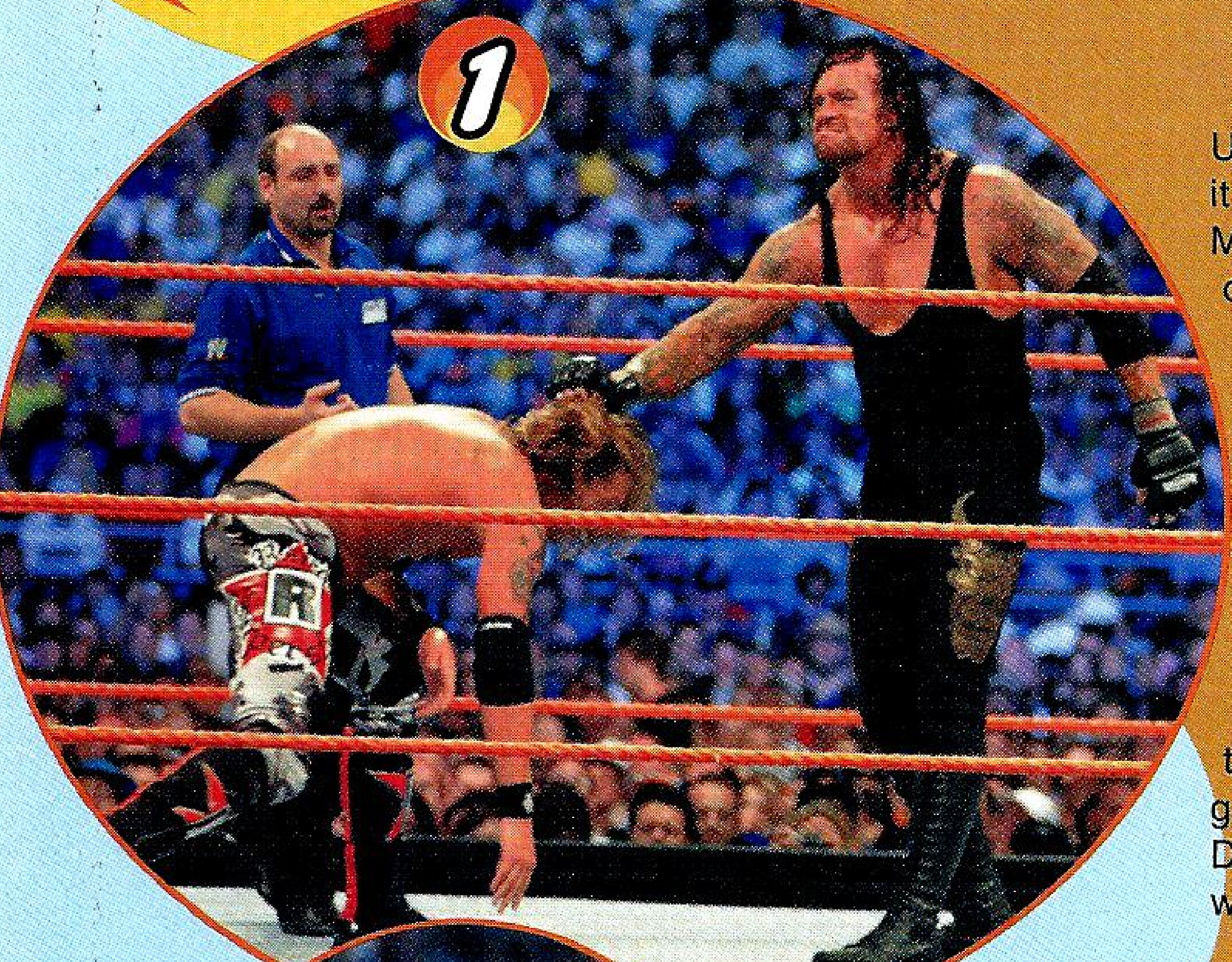


The Real Winners & Losers

3

MATCH: UNDERTAKER vs. EDGE

(Smackdown World title match)



1. The Undertaker helps Edge to his feet with a yank of the hair. Determined to extend his WrestleMania winning streak, the "Dead Man" spared no opportunity to brutalize Edge in their Smackdown title encounter.

2. Edge gets into position to land the superplex that nearly ended the match. Despite losing his title to The Undertaker, Edge's pre-match strategy was to extend his senior challenger past the 20-minute mark. He was able to do just that, but it did him no good.

3. 'Taker was poised to finish off Edge with his infamous chokeslam, but the "Rated R Superstar" reversed the move into a DDT. The Undertaker's game plan featured a steady assault on Edge's throat. The strategy left Edge vulnerable to a triangle choke.

WHAT HAPPENED: If Edge was intimidated by The Undertaker's foreboding entrance, he certainly didn't show it. The "Rated R Superstar" immediately shoved the "Dead Man" and fired a series of rights into 'Taker's face. Undertaker countered by clotheslining Edge and dropping him neck-first over the top rope. 'Taker's attacks on Edge's throat were precursors to the triangle choke that was to come.

Undertaker went to the top rope for his patented old school ropewalk, but Edge quickly pulled him down.

'Taker recovered and worked Edge into a corner. UT connected with a clothesline, but the momentum sent him sailing over the top rope to the floor. Edge took over, connecting with a baseball slide that sent UT into the guardrail. Edge then slammed 'Taker back-first into the ring apron. He wisely worked over UT's back, which gave out when 'Taker attempted to hoist Edge up for a slam. Despite his hurt back, Undertaker was still able to connect with a thrilling suicide dive to the floor.

UT went back to Edge's neck, hitting a legdrop on the apron, but his back gave out again when he went for his last ride power bomb. Edge took the match back to the floor and threw UT into the crowd. He sent 'Taker back into the ring and applied a half crab. Undertaker rallied with a series of roundhouse kicks, but Edge connected with a crisp dropkick.

Edge went back to the top rope, where UT caught him and attempted a chokeslam, but Edge slipped free and hit a hard DDT for a two-count. Sorry, but the "Dead Man's" vaunted streak wasn't going to end that easily. UT came back with a big kick and hit the chokeslam for a two-count of his own.

Again, Undertaker went for the ropewalk, but Edge crotched him on the top rope and hit a superplex for another near fall. UT again rallied, and went for another last ride, but Edge countered with a neckbreaker. UT recovered and finally hit the last ride, but Edge wouldn't stay down and escaped a tombstone attempt with an inverted DDT.

UT went for a running kick, but accidentally hit referee Jimmy Korderas. Edge grabbed a ringside camera and slammed it into 'Taker's head. Edge went for a tombstone piledriver, but UT reversed the move and went for the cover. Referee Charles Robinson sprinted to the ring and made the count, but Edge kicked out at two. Zack Ryder and Curt Hawkins hit the ring, but UT laid them out only to walk into a spear from Edge. When Edge attempted a second spear, 'Taker caught him with a triangle choke. Despite a valiant effort, Edge had little choice but to tap out.

THE WINNER: The Undertaker by submission in 23:55.

THE REAL WINNER: The Undertaker. He upped his WrestleMania streak to 16-0, and added yet another chapter to his legacy of greatness.

ANOTHER WINNER: Edge. He lost the match, but he gave UT all he could handle. And he also got to headline WrestleMania.

THE REAL LOSER: Randy Orton. 'Taker's win largely eclipsed Orton's victory. Because of the placement of matches, WrestleMania ended with 'Taker celebrating in the ring ... not Orton. That has to infuriate the "Legend Killer."

MATCH:

RANDY ORTON vs. TRIPLE-H vs. JOHN CENA

(triple-threat Raw World title match)

WHAT HAPPENED: John Cena made a memorable entrance as a marching band, lined up along the entrance ramp, played his theme music. Triple-H entered amidst a fanfare of fireworks. The reigning Raw champion, Randy Orton, made a relatively understated entrance. A pre-match fan poll had 52 percent of fans expecting Cena to win the match, 40 percent predicting Triple-H, and a mere eight percent predicting Orton would retain his title.

The bout was announced as a no-DQ match, and Orton immediately took advantage, blasting Triple-H with the title belt. Orton and Cena squared off and the battle spilled to the floor, where Triple-H and Orton brawled at the ECW announcing table. When the three returned to the ring, Cena hoisted both HHH and Orton on his shoulders and attempted a double FU, but Helmsley slipped free and floored Cena with a low blow.

Triple-H and former Evolution teammate Orton double-teamed Cena as HHH lifted Cena onto his shoulders and Orton came off the top rope with a cross-bodyblock. Fortunately for Cena, he was able to roll through to avoid the brunt of the impact. Orton reasserted himself with a pair of big clotheslines, and then dropped both HHH and Cena with a double-DDT.

Orton waited to see which wrestler would be the first to rise. When Cena struggled to his feet, Orton went for his RKO, but Cena shoved Orton into Triple-H. Cena took over with a legdrop off the top rope onto Orton, forcing Orton to run to the floor for a breather. Cena pursued, but Orton sent him head-first into the corner post.

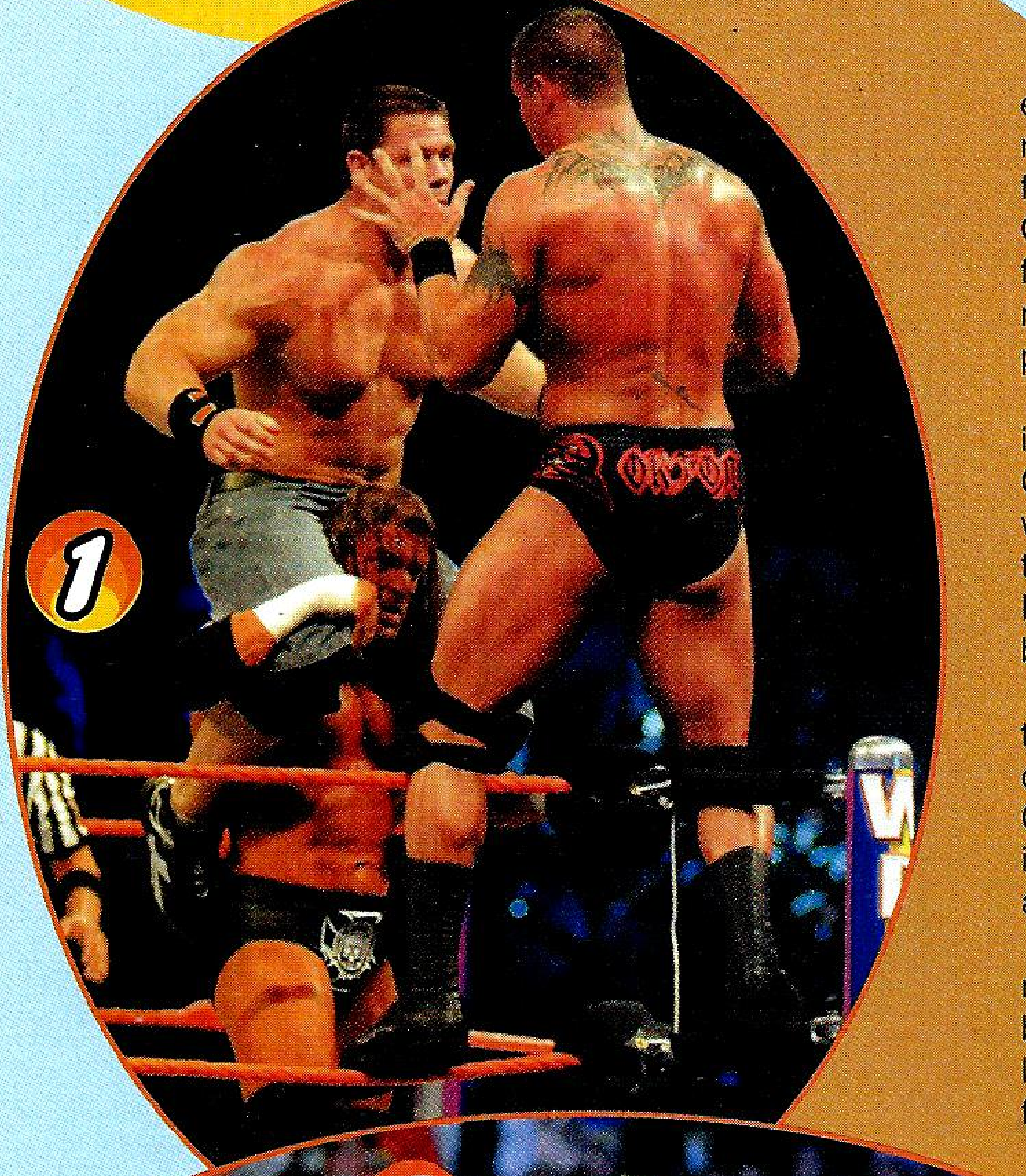
Triple-H tried to slow the pace of the match and worked over Orton's left knee, but Cena stopped him with a clothesline that set up "The Game" for an RKO by Orton. Before Orton could make a cover, Cena locked him in a STFU, but Orton freed himself, thanks to HHH, who helped him to the ropes to force a break. Triple-H went back to work on Orton's knee but was thrown out of the ring and Cena reapplied the STFU on Orton.

Once again, HHH made the save, and then applied a version of the Crippler crossface on Cena. Cena got to the ropes and then countered with a sideslam and his five-knuckle shuffle. HHH avoided the FU, and connected with a spinebuster. Triple-H clipped Orton's knee, and then landed a pedigree on Cena. With Cena unconscious, HHH went for the cover. But Orton had recovered enough to land a brutal running kick to Triple-H's temple. HHH slumped to the mat and Orton made the cover on the fallen Cena.

THE WINNER: Randy Orton by pinfall in 14:25.

THE REAL WINNER: Randy Orton. His first title reign in 2004 was a disappointment that only lasted a few months. Last fall, he was awarded the title due to Cena's injury, and then lost it in his very first match against Triple-H. He regained the title later that night, but only because HHH had been forced to wrestle three times on one card. By surviving WrestleMania, Orton finally proved he was more than a fluke champion. The "Legend Killer" is not a transitional champ.

THE REAL LOSER: John Cena. Cena rushed back from his pectoral muscle tear to win the Royal Rumble. He squandered that title shot at No Way Out, then came up short at WrestleMania. How many more shots will he get?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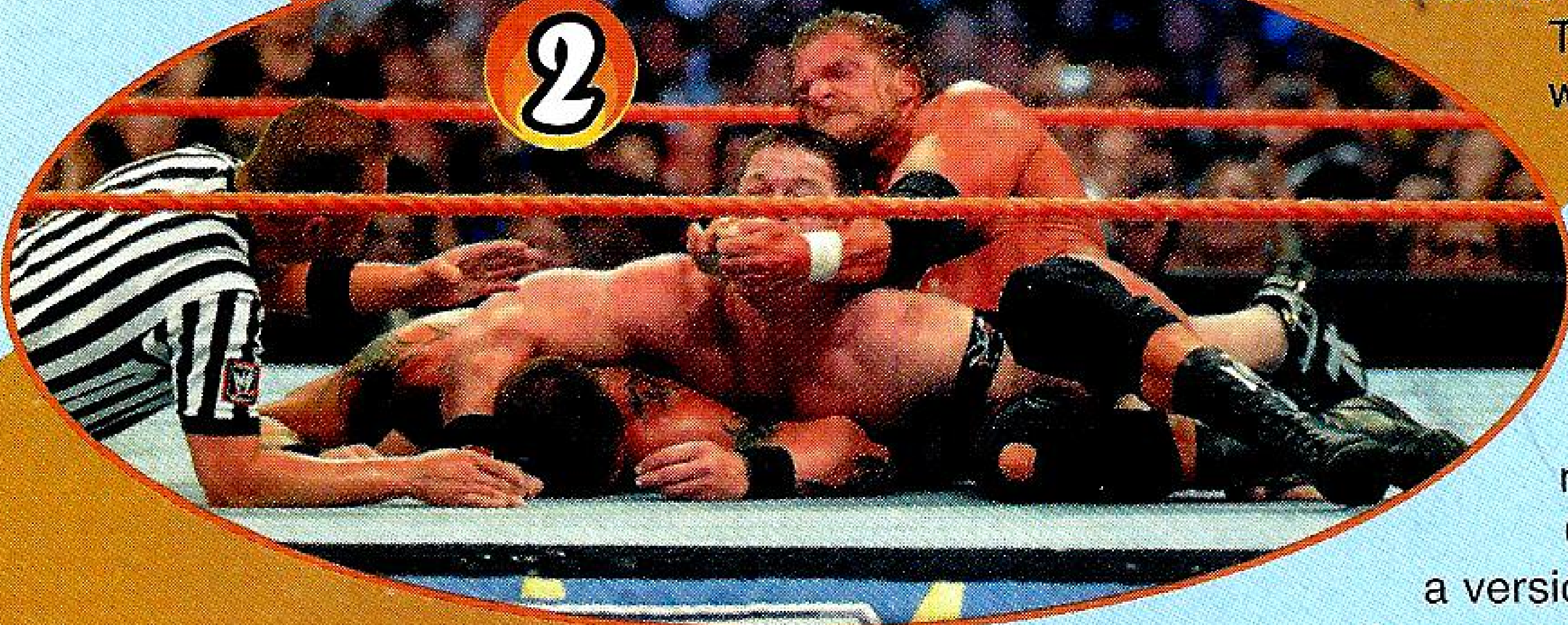
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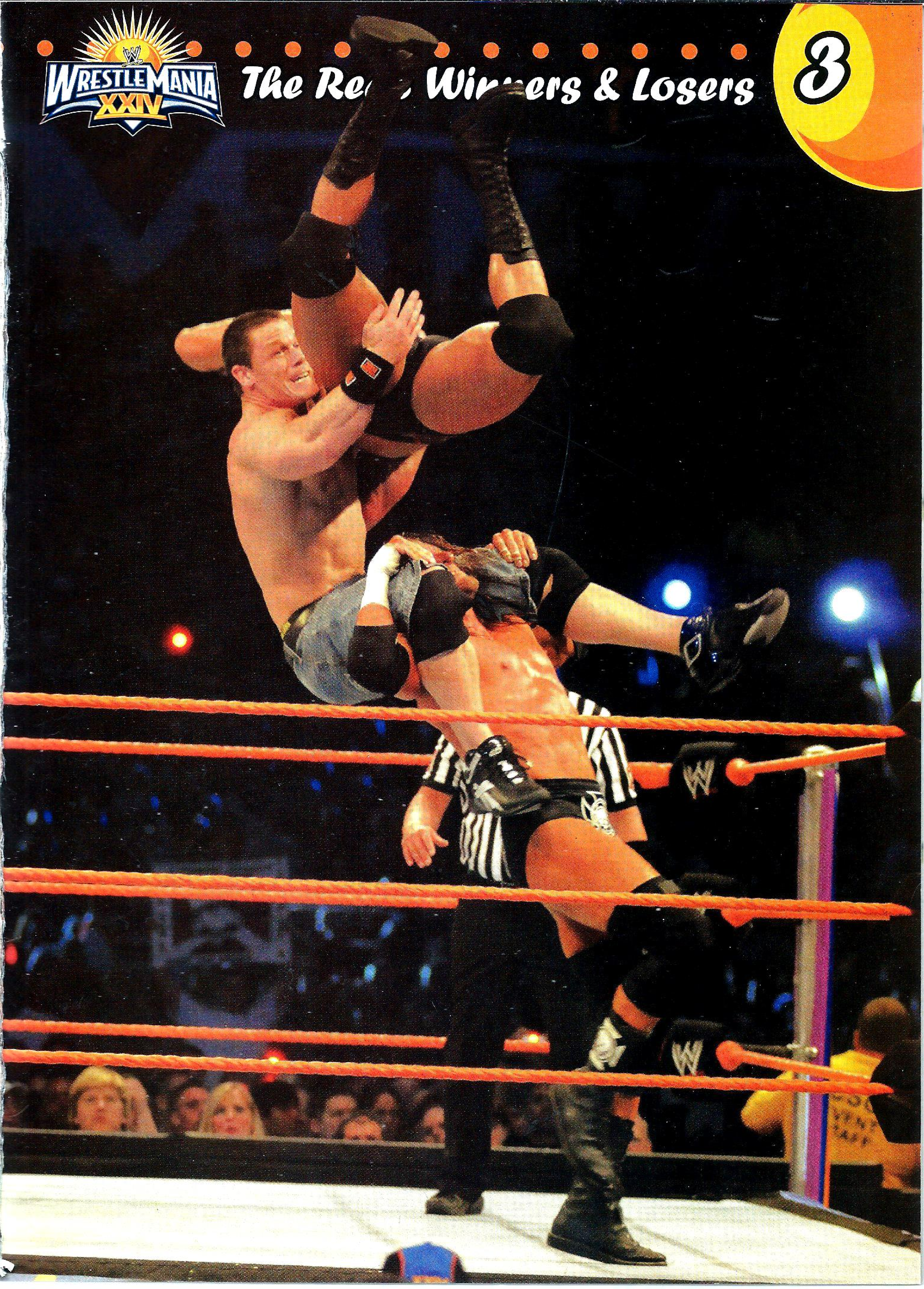
1. In a scene that was symbolic of the entire match, it's hard to tell who's controlling the action. Is it Triple-H, who has John Cena off his feet? Cena, who has Randy Orton trapped in a corner? Or is it Orton, who has just a short hop to the floor?

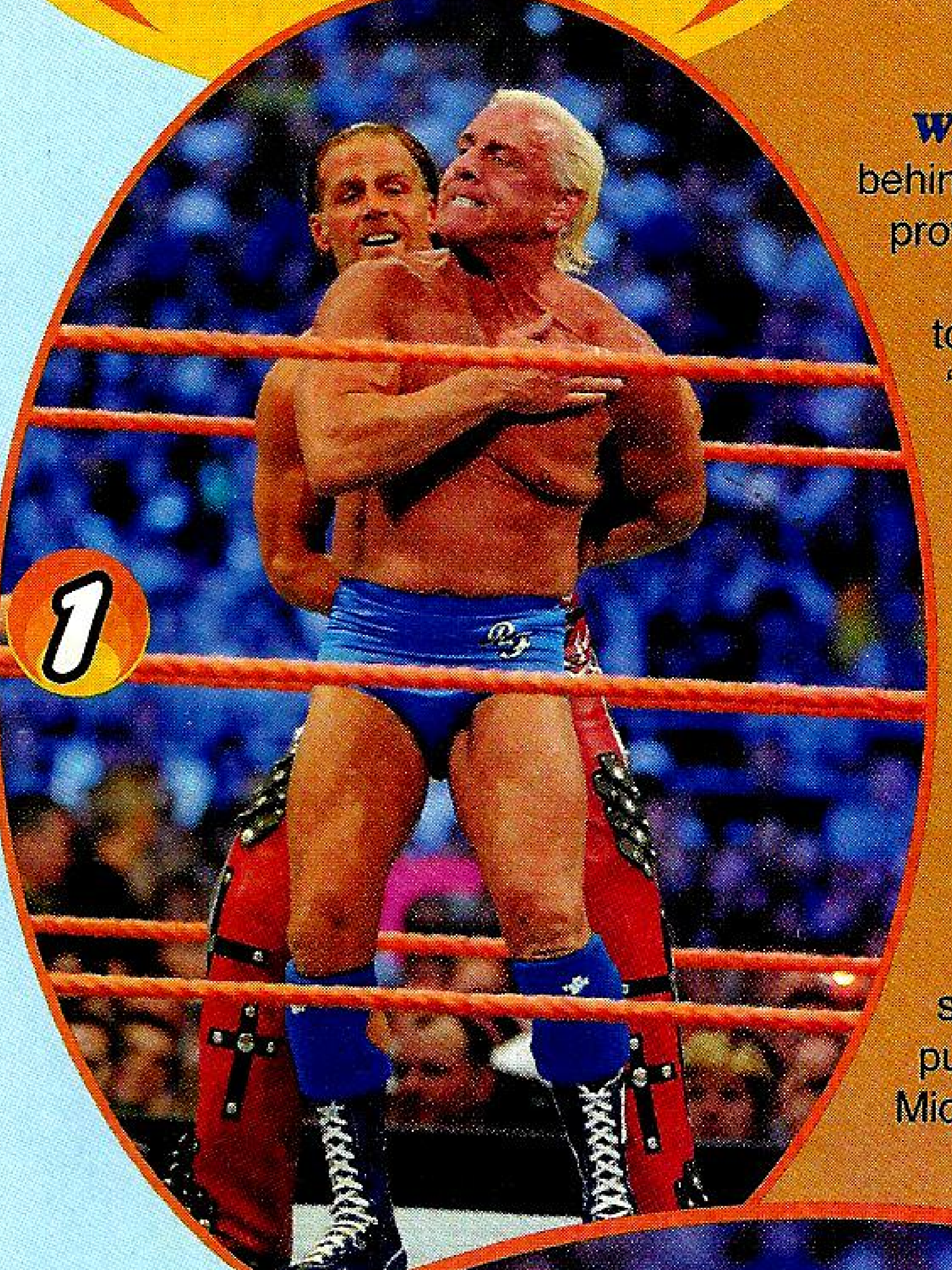
2. In one of the match's most compelling sequences, Triple-H clamps an arm trap crossface on Cena, forcing him to break the STFU he had cinched on Orton. The "Legend Killer" later capitalized on a similar exchange by kicking HHH in the head and pinning Cena.

3. Former Evolution teammates Orton and Triple-H partnered to take Cena out with this elevated cross-bodyblock. Cena, however, was able to avoid most of the impact by cradling Orton on the way down.



MATCH:

SHAWN MICHAELS vs. RIC FLAIR
("Career-Threatening" match)



1

WHAT HAPPENED: Shawn Michaels promised he would take "Old Yeller" out behind the woodshed and put him down for good, but Ric Flair was determined to prove he had one last epic match in him before he sauntered off into retirement.

Michaels scored the first takedown, but the "Nature Boy" scored with a drop toehold and backed Michaels into the corner. Flair taunted Michaels with a "*Whoooooo!*" but Michaels responded with a slap that ripped open Flair's lip. Flair and Michaels exchanged very stiff chops and Flair connected with a cross-bodyblock off the top for a near fall.

Michaels threw Flair to the outside, but "Mr. WrestleMania" missed with a springboard moonsault to the floor and crashed into the announcers' table, injuring his ribs.

Ever the opportunist, Flair took over, hitting a sideslam and a pair of suplexes on the injured Michaels. Flair went back to his knife-edge chops, but Michaels countered with a swinging neckbreaker and sent Flair outside the ring. The "Heartbreak Kid" connected with a second moonsault attempt, and both wrestlers were barely able to beat the 10-count getting back into the ring.

Michaels executed an inverted atomic drop and hit an elbow off the top rope to set up his sweet chin music. Michaels had Flair dead in his sights, but rather than put Flair away, he hesitated. Flair took advantage of the opportunity and hooked Michaels in the figure-four. After several excruciating minutes, Michaels was able to reverse the move, prompting Flair to grab the ropes for a break.

Michaels scored another near fall with a sunset flip, but Flair clipped Michaels' knee and again went for another figure-four. Michaels countered with an inside cradle for a two-count, but Flair managed to reapply the figure-four until Michaels was able to get to the ropes. Michaels got to his feet and nailed Flair with the sweet chin music, but Flair managed to lift his shoulder at the two-count.

Michaels went back to set up a second superkick, but Flair flailed and was barely able to get back to his feet. Michaels finally picked Flair up, but received a low blow from the "dirtiest player in the game." Michaels locked on his version of the figure-four, but Flair grabbed the ropes to escape.

Michaels lined up Flair for another superkick. "I'm sorry. I love you," Michaels said. Then he hit the sweet chin music and officially closed Space Mountain for good.

2

THE WINNER: Shawn Michaels by pinfall in 20:41.

THE REAL WINNER: Ric Flair. Flair lost the match, but had the chance to go out as a superstar in a classic WrestleMania match. It's a shame Flair's career had to come to an end, but he went out with the class and dignity befitting the greatest wrestler of the modern era.

ANOTHER WINNER: The fans. Flair's "farewell tour" gave all his fans an opportunity to savor their memories of the "Nature Boy." Flair delivered a classic match as his swan song. It was a bittersweet ending, but it brought closure to an unparalleled career.

THE REAL LOSER: Hulk Hogan. "The Hulkster" has pushed for one last match against Steve Austin, but that may never happen. Meanwhile, his longtime nemesis got a hero's sendoff … while Hogan watched from the sidelines.

ANOTHER LOSER: Shawn Michaels. For the rest of his career, Michaels will carry the burden of retiring his hero. And Michaels will have to answer to the likes of Batista, HHH, and others who may take issue with Michaels for his "Old Yeller" comments.

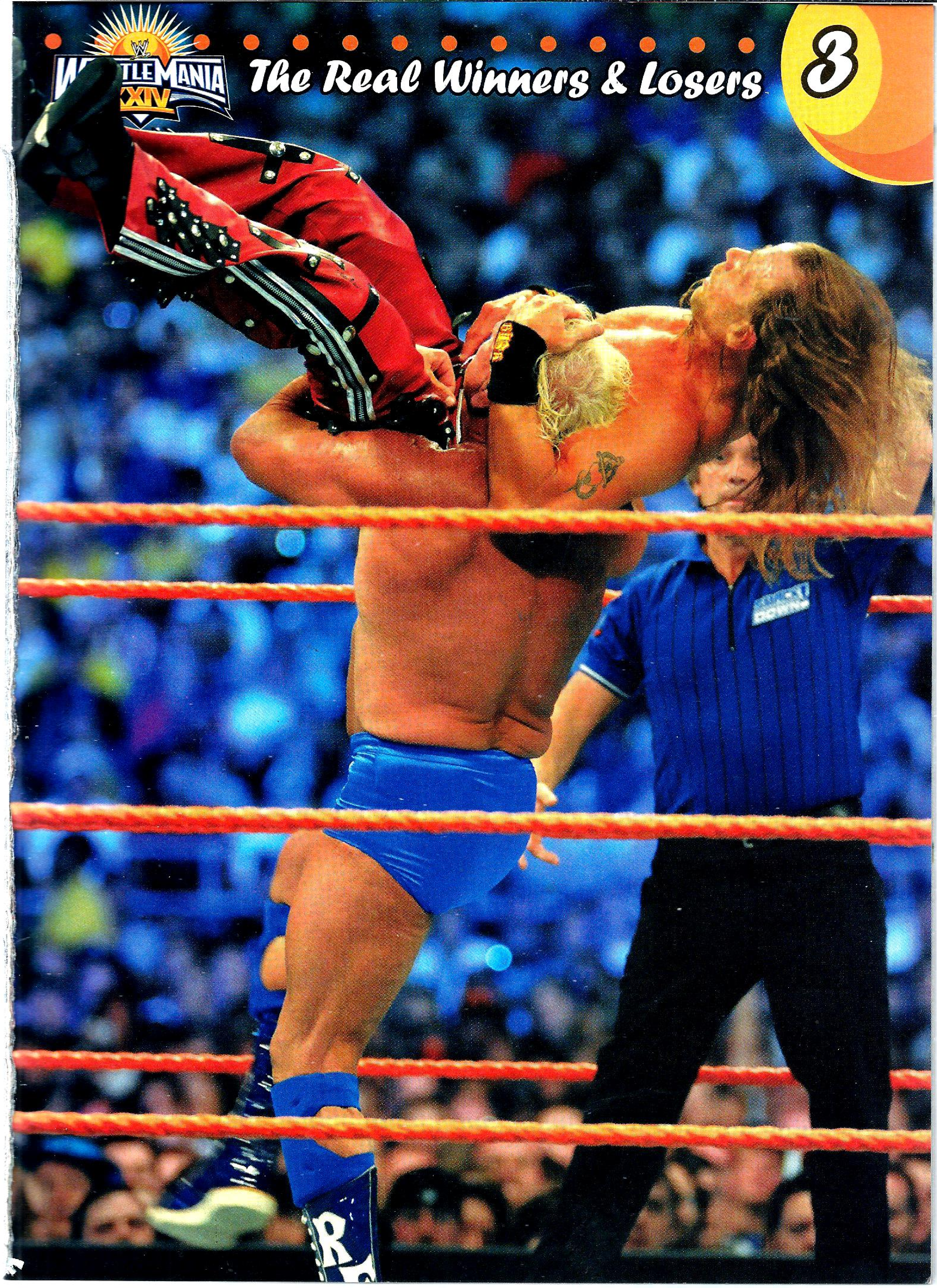
1. Ric Flair's match against HBK featured various styles of wrestling. The bout kicked off with a series of go-behinds and mat-based takedowns, as well as this hammerlock from Michaels.

2. Prior to planting the superkick on Flair's kisser that ended an era, Michaels apologized and told Flair he loved him. Then he pinned and retired the "Nature Boy."

3. Flair's immense acumen was on full display at WM24. In this position, Flair can convert Michaels' headlock into a variety of slams and drivers.

3

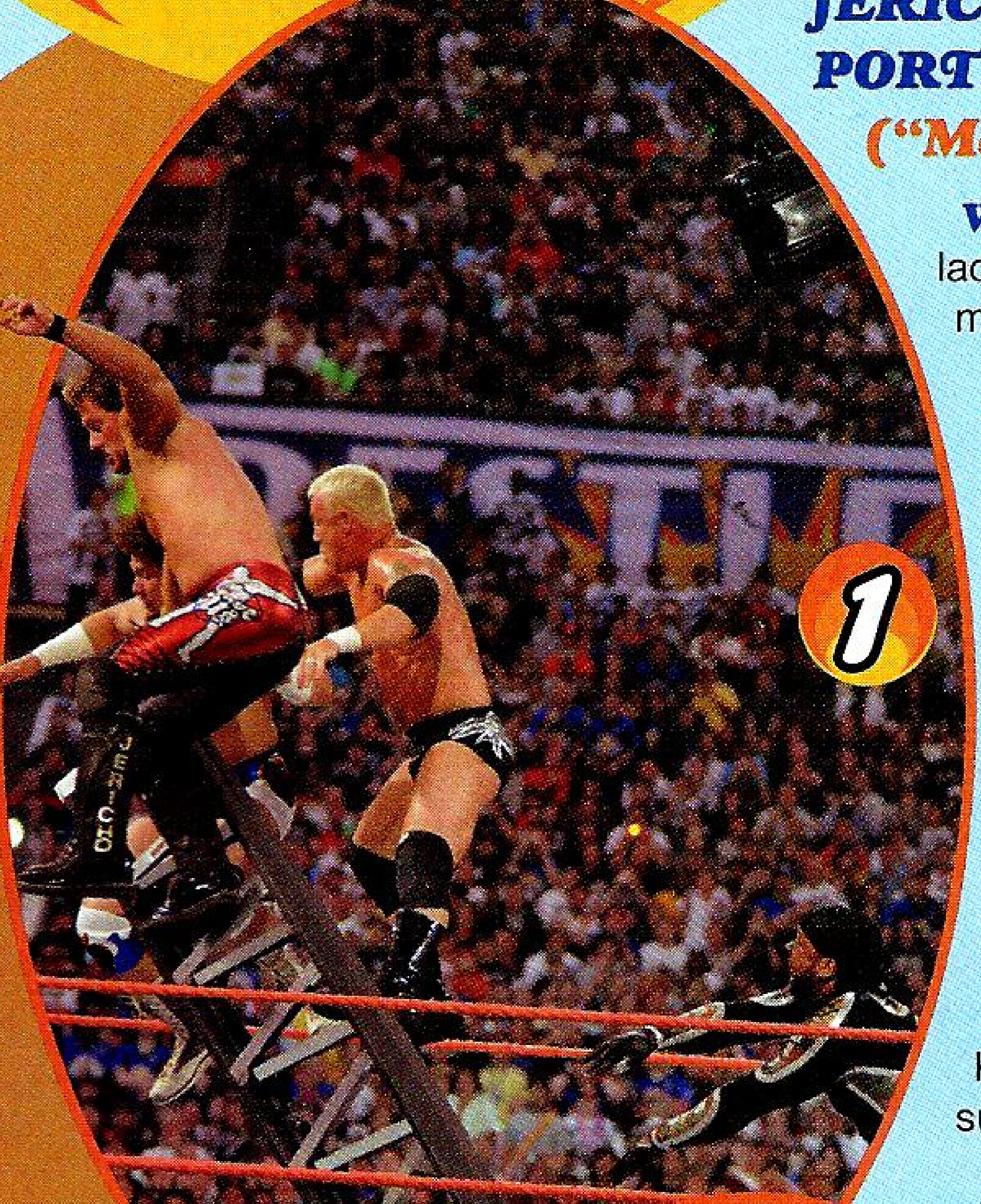
The Real Winners & Losers

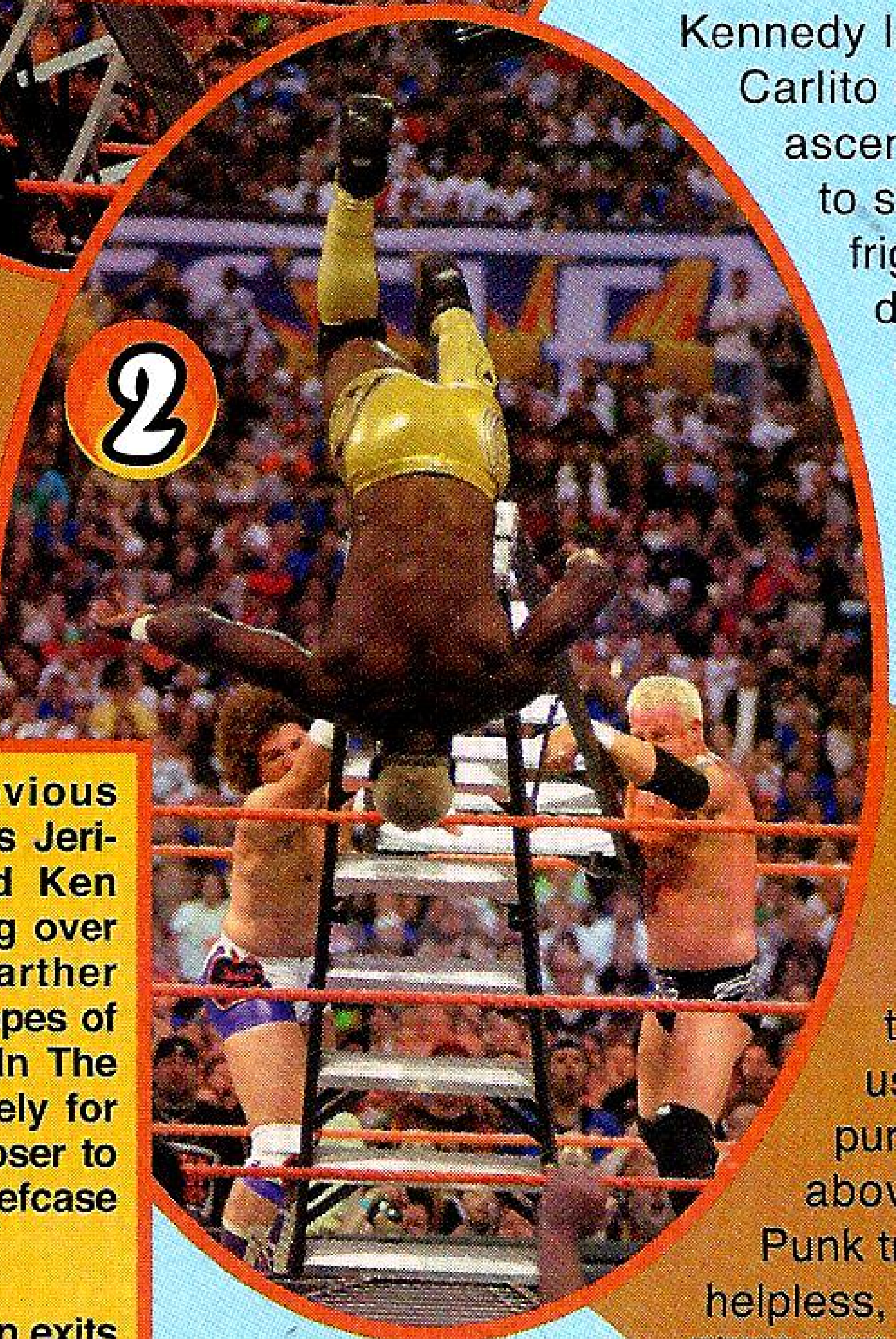


MATCH:

C.M. PUNK *vs.* SHELTON BENJAMIN *vs.* CHRIS JERICHO *vs.* CARLITO *vs.* MONTEL VONTAVIOUS PORTER *vs.* KEN KENNEDY *vs.* JOHN MORRISON

("Money In The Bank" ladder match)





1. Montel Vontavious Porter sends Chris Jericho, Carlito, and Ken Kennedy sprawling over the ropes and farther away from their hopes of securing "Money In The Bank." Unfortunately for MVP, he got no closer to the suspended briefcase than they did.

2. Shelton Benjamin exits the ring with some help from Carlito and Kennedy. After landing on the ringside floor, Benjamin could not continue.

3. C.M. Punk delivers one last kick to Jericho as he seizes the briefcase. Punk and Jericho pitched a fierce battle on the ladder before Y2J got his leg tangled in the rungs.

WHAT HAPPENED: Once again, the annual "Money In The Bank" ladder match showcased some of the most memorable—and frightening—moments of the night.

When the opening bell sounded, every wrestler except MVP bailed out of the ring and raced to grab ladders and make a mad dash for the briefcase hanging above the ring. MVP played king of the mountain, attacking every wrestler as they tried to get back into the ring, until Chris Jericho nailed him with a ladder.

John Morrison apparently decided he was going to get a WrestleMania moment as soon as possible. After sending Jericho to the floor with everyone else, Morrison hoisted a ladder and executed a stunning moonsault from the top rope to the floor, taking out the other six wrestlers.

Ken Kennedy recovered first and climbed a ladder, looking to be the first wrestler to repeat as a MITB winner. Morrison climbed up the opposite side and caught Kennedy, while Shelton Benjamin leapt off another ladder and hit a sunset flip on Kennedy. Benjamin held onto Kennedy in a power bomb, while Kennedy held on to Morrison in a superplex, sending all three crashing to the mat in a tower of doom.

C.M. Punk took out ECW's "Gold Standard" with a go to sleep, but Kennedy laid out Punk with a flipping senton bomb onto the ladder. Carlito clipped MVP's left knee with a ladder, then began a slow ascent up the ladder. Benjamin and Kennedy scaled the ladder to stop him, and the three traded punches until Shelton took a frightening fall from the ladder and crashed into another ladder draped from the ring apron to the ring barrier. Benjamin was unable to continue after the fall.

The remaining wrestlers took turns trying to climb the ladder before being sent to the canvas. At one point, Jericho and Morrison stood alone with the briefcase just inches from their grasp. Jericho, a ladder match veteran, hooked Morrison in a variation of the Walls of Jericho at the top of the ladder. Carlito stopped Y2J with a back-stabber off the ladder, leaving MVP as the last man standing. The U.S. champion began climbing the ladder, only to be foiled by Matt Hardy, who emerged from the crowd and caught MVP with a twist of fate off the ladder.

After Morrison, Kennedy, and Carlito were sent falling from the ladder, Jericho connected with a codebreaker on Punk, using another ladder. Jericho climbed the ladder with Punk in pursuit, and the two exchanged punches as the briefcase swung above them. Jericho smashed the case into Punk's face, but Punk trapped Jericho's leg under a rung of the ladder. With Jericho helpless, Punk was able to grab the case and the future title shot.

THE WINNER: C.M. Punk in 14:06.

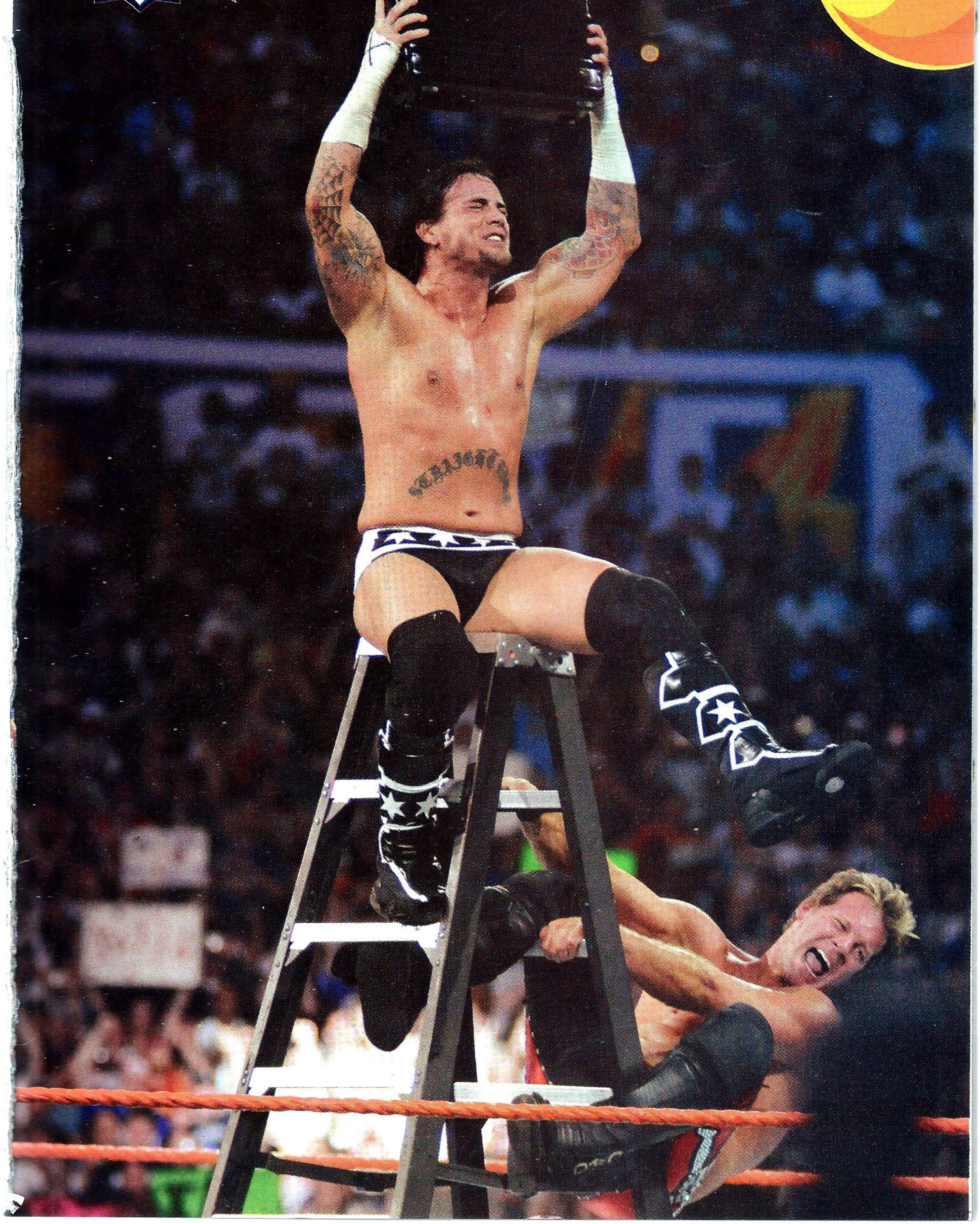
THE REAL WINNER: Matt Hardy. His surprise return thrust Hardy into world title contention. The next night on TV, Hardy emerged from the crowd and demanded a match with Raw World champ Randy Orton. Perhaps caught up in the moment, GM William Regal gave Hardy what he and his fans wanted. Hardy lost the non-title tilt, but the bout served as notice to Orton that Matt is a serious contender.

THE REAL LOSER: Chris Jericho. Y2J got ample opportunity to shake off some ring rust at WM24, and he did beat Punk convincingly on Raw the next night. But the MITB loss did nothing to improve Jericho's place on the roster. A week after WM, he was back to hosting his "Highlight Reel" segments.

ANOTHER LOSER: Benjamin once again had an incredible performance at 'Mania and came away empty-handed. Will it be *another* 12 months before he gets a chance to shine?

The Real Winners & Losers

3



MATCH:

FLOYD MAYWEATHER JR. vs. THE BIG SHOW

WHAT HAPPENED: All the speculation about how this unique match would be contested came to an end when it was announced the bout would be held under no-holds-barred rules and could end by pinfall, submission, or knockout. The relaxed rules seemed to favor The Big Show, but it quickly became apparent that Floyd Mayweather was going to do whatever he had to do to put Show down for the 10-count.

Cannons fired money into the air as Mayweather, draped in bling, made his way to the ring. Once the bell sounded, the 5'8", 147-pound boxer used his speed and footwork to dance around the 485-pound, 7'2" Show and avoid locking up. After several fruitless charges, Big Show showed frustration and relaxed his guard, allowing Mayweather to connect with quick jabs to the midsection and face. Oozing confidence, Mayweather called one of his entourage up to the ring apron, and Mayweather took a big drink of water out of a gaudy "crunk cup" goblet.

Mayweather's insolence infuriated Show, and he responded by blasting Mayweather's crony off the apron. He then pulled the posse member into the ring and leveled him with a chop that wiped the smirk from Mayweather's face.

Feeling the gravity of the situation, Mayweather threw a hard right at Show, but Show caught the fist and tried to stomp on the welterweight champion's hand, drawing loud protests from Mayweather's crew. Mayweather barely avoided the stomp, and Show picked him up and perched him on the top turnbuckle, where he could be face-to-face with the man *Ring* magazine lists as the top boxer, pound-for-pound.

Mayweather fired off some quick rights to back Show up, then jumped onto his back and tried to choke him out. After several minutes, Show was finally able to slam Mayweather off his back, and then stomped on the boxer's left arm. Show hushed the crowd and pounded Mayweather with an echoing chop in the corner. Next, he stood on Maywether's back while taunting Floyd's handlers.

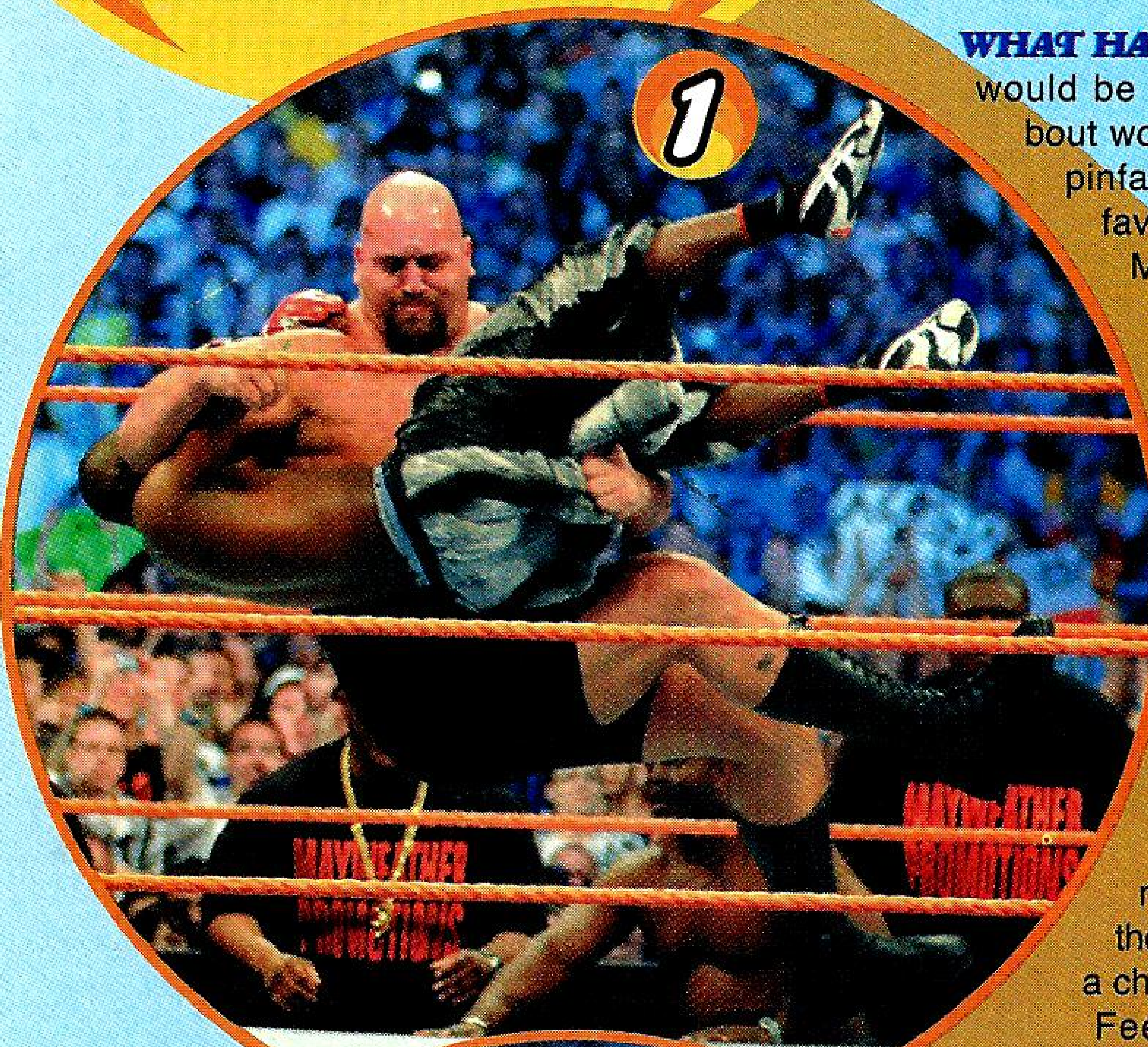
Mayweather responded with a few kicks, but Show flattened him with a sideslam. Sensing Mayweather was on the verge of injury, "Money's" entourage pulled him from the ring and tried to take him to the dressing room. Show chased them down, knocked down all Mayweather's cronies, and carried Mayweather back to the ring. Show went to end the match with a chokeslam, but another member of the boxer's crew hit Show with a chair. Show dispatched that intruder with a chokeslam, but Mayweather picked up the chair and cracked Show in the back. Show blocked a headshot, but Mayweather kicked Show in the groin, and then blasted him twice in the head with the chair. Finally, Mayweather grabbed a pair of brass knuckles and punched Show in the jaw, knocking The Big Show unconscious.

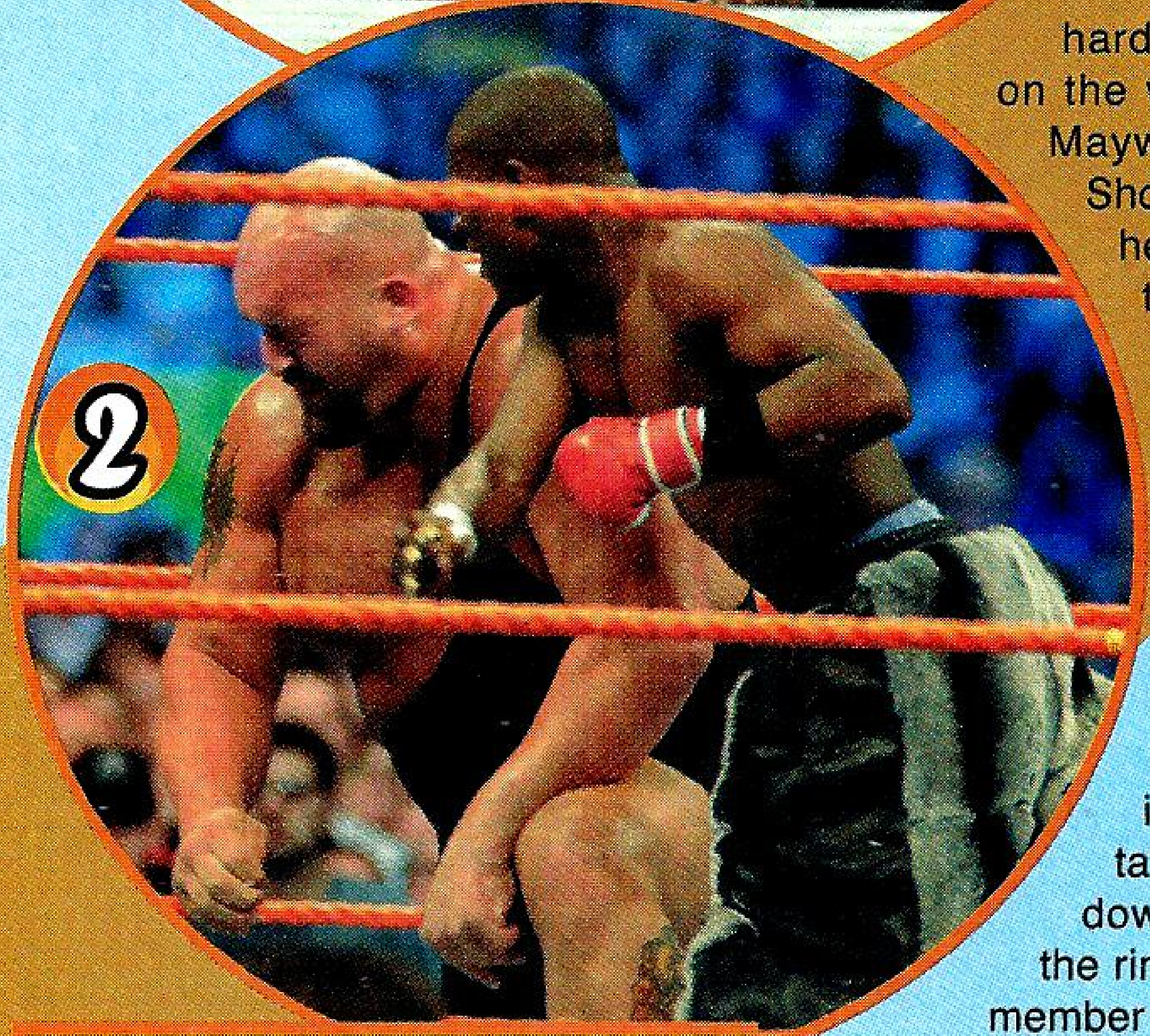
THE WINNER: Floyd Mayweather by knockout in 11:38.

THE REAL WINNER: Big Show. He may have lost the match to a much smaller man, but it was obvious that Mayweather needed outside interference and weapons just to survive. Despite the loss, Show looked as dominant as he has ever looked, and he came off as a sympathetic character and not a bully—which is impressive, considering his 250-plus-pound weight advantage.

ANOTHER WINNER: Oscar De La Hoya. "The Golden Boy" should thank Mayweather's handlers for ensuring that he will get his eight-figure payday for fighting Mayweather in September.

THE REAL LOSER: Mayweather. The last thing boxing needs is one of its most marketable stars becoming a clown. For any wrestling fan unfamiliar with Mayweather's boxing abilities, "Money" Mayweather came off as a prelim bum.

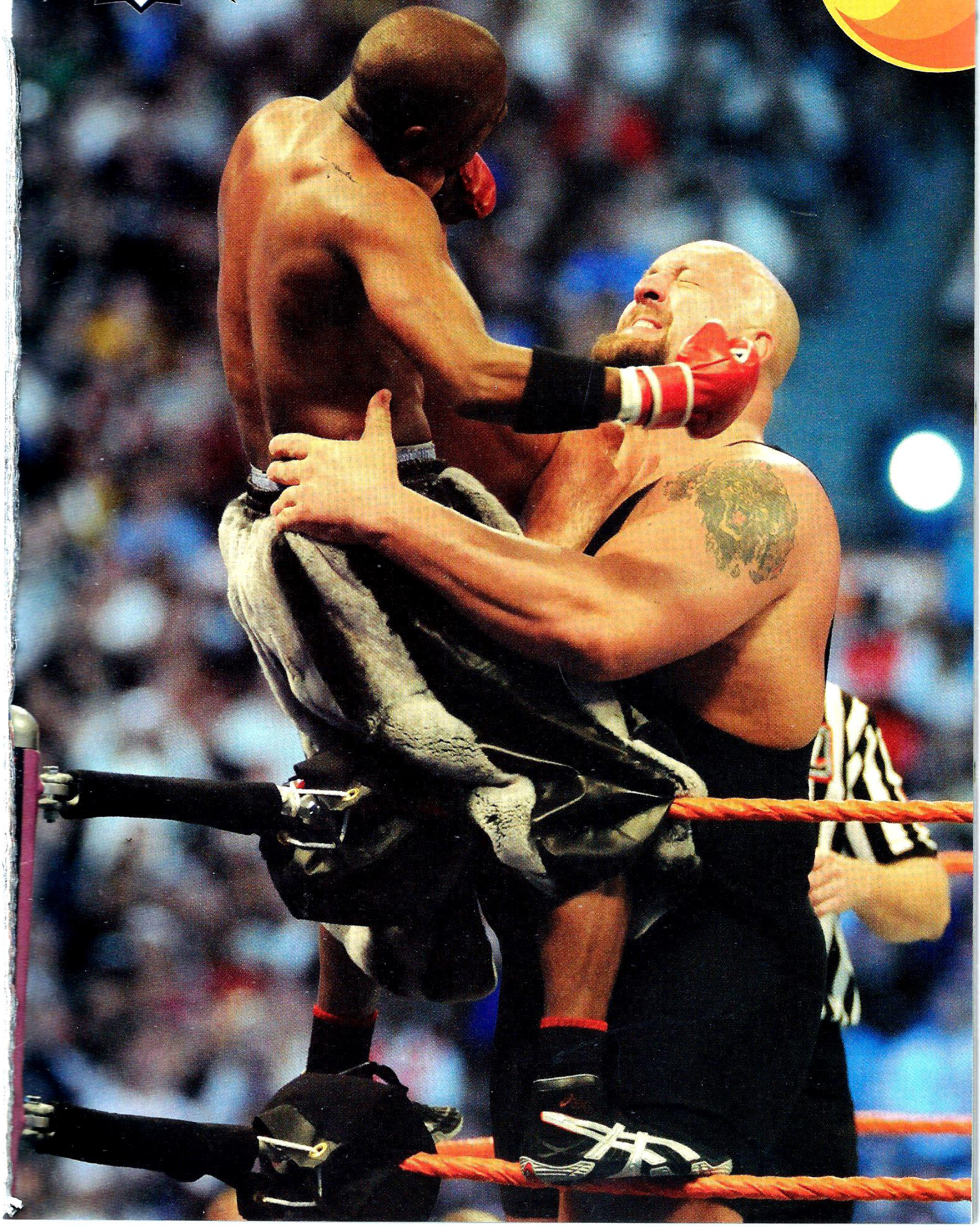




1. The Big Show tries to sideslam some respect into Floyd "Money" Mayweather. Put off by Mayweather's cockiness, Show manhandled the welterweight star ... when he was able to get his hands on him.

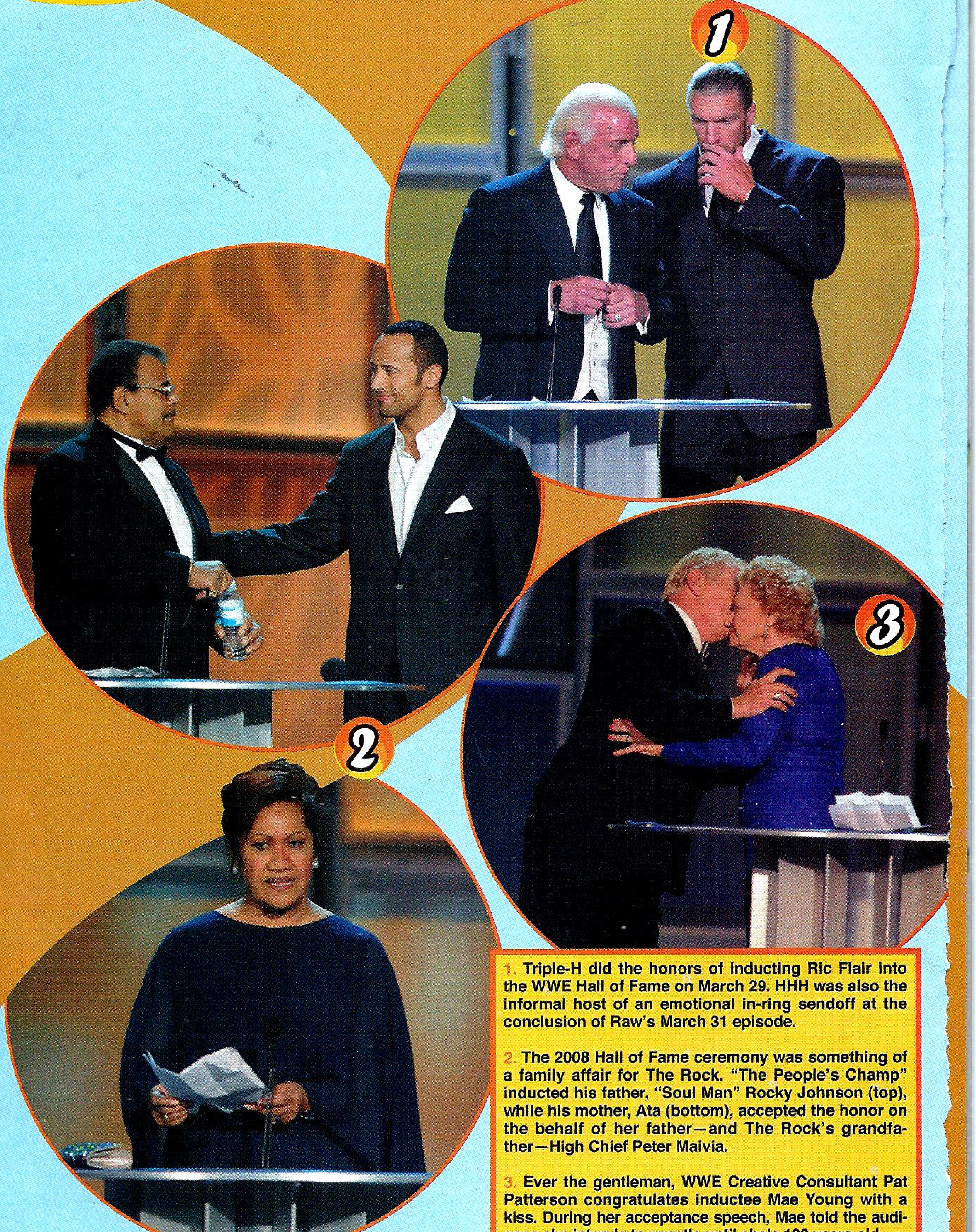
2. Mayweather lands the crushing right with brass knuckles that put Show down for the count. But without the help of several handlers as well as a steel chair, "Money" would have never been in position to deliver the blow.

3. Floyd peppers Big Show with punches as the big man plants him on the top ropes. Mayweather's punches were flashy, but hardly put Big Show on the defensive. Floyd's speed hardly negated Show's vast size advantage.



WWE Hall of Fame

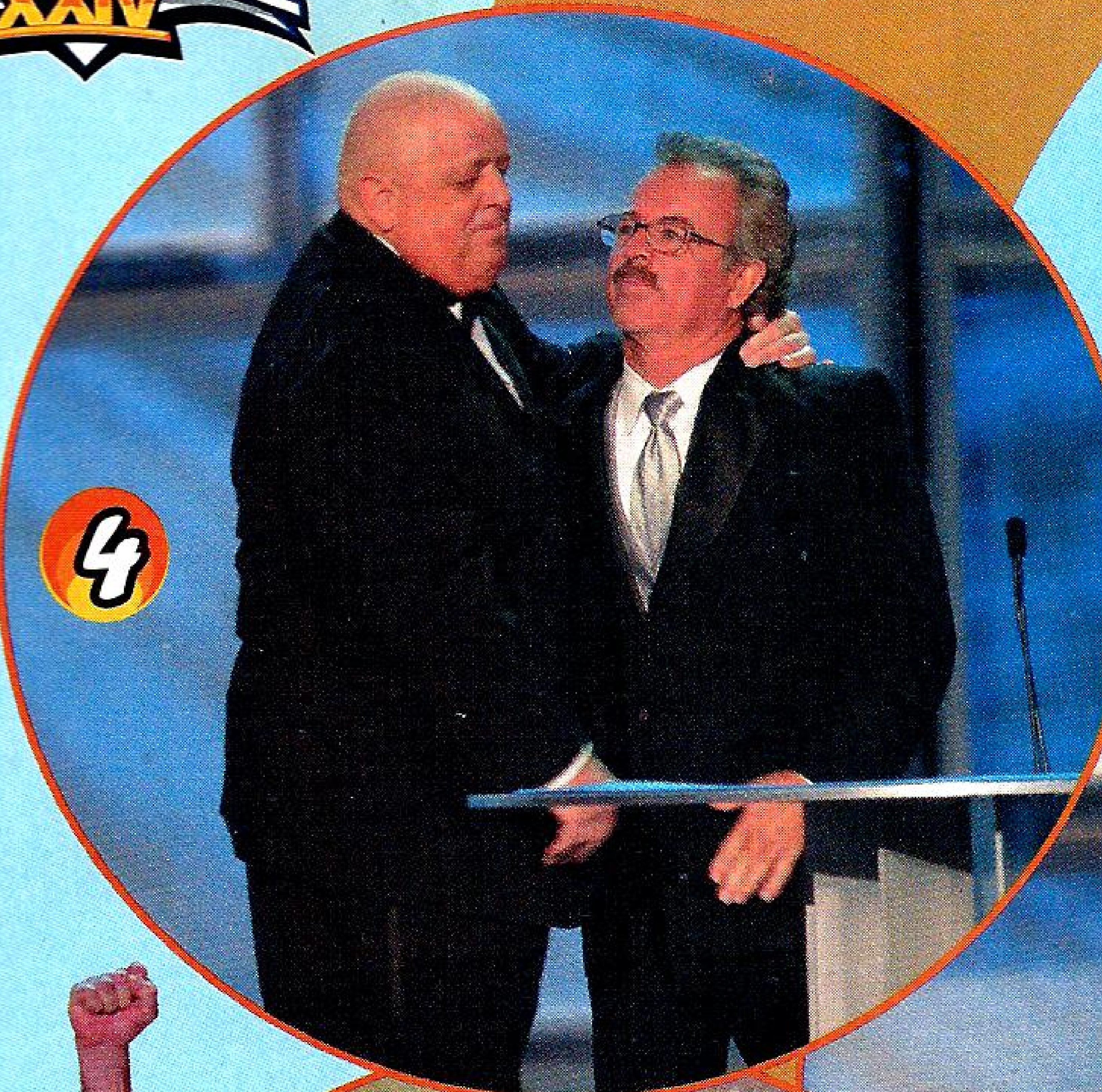
Photos By George Napolitano



1. Triple-H did the honors of inducting Ric Flair into the WWE Hall of Fame on March 29. HHH was also the informal host of an emotional in-ring sendoff at the conclusion of Raw's March 31 episode.

2. The 2008 Hall of Fame ceremony was something of a family affair for The Rock. "The People's Champ" inducted his father, "Soul Man" Rocky Johnson (top), while his mother, Ata (bottom), accepted the honor on the behalf of her father—and The Rock's grandfather—High Chief Peter Maivia.

3. Ever the gentleman, WWE Creative Consultant Pat Patterson congratulates inductee Mae Young with a kiss. During her acceptance speech, Mae told the audience she intends to wrestle until she's 100 years old.



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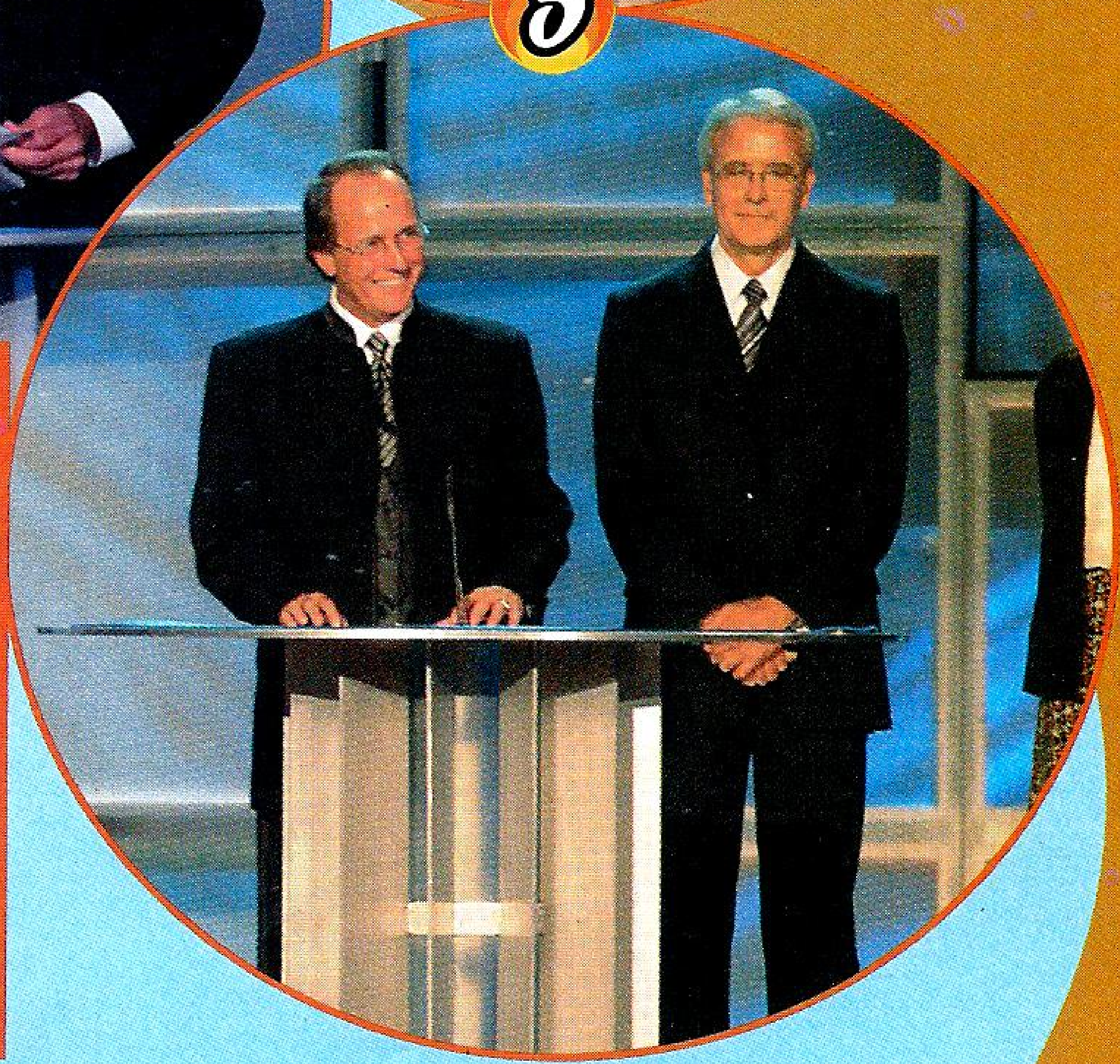


4. Dusty Rhodes was a fixture in Florida wrestling during the early days of his illustrious career and sold lots of tickets for promoter Eddie Graham, who was honored with a posthumous induction into the Hall of Fame. Eddie's son, Mike, and the "American Dream" spoke about Graham's many contributions to the industry.

5. Having worked with and learned from the greatest announcer in wrestling history, it was only natural that Jim Ross (top) induct the late Gordon Solie into the WWE Hall of Fame. Solie's children (bottom) were on hand to receive their late father's plaudits.

6. After a raucous introduction from John Bradshaw Layfield, former NWA World tag team champions Jack and Jerry Brisco enthusiastically recount the glory days during their induction speech. Jerry was especially demonstrative, specifically when discussing JBL.

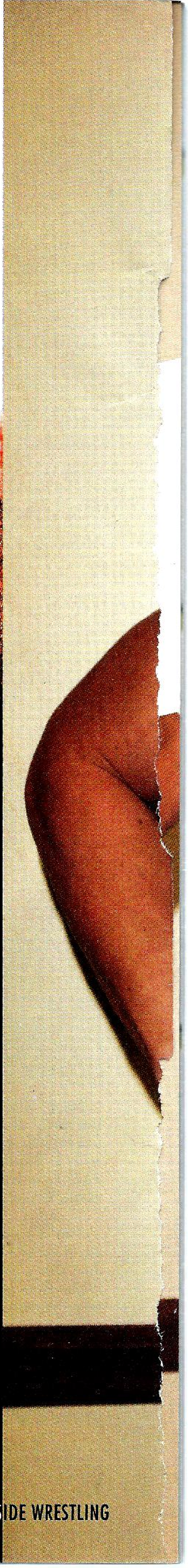
why won't the fans honor NIGEL McGuinness?

By Al Castle

IT SHOULD HAVE been one of the biggest nights in the career of Nigel McGuinness.

With tens of thousands of wrestling fans converging in Orlando, Florida, for WrestleMania weekend, Ring of Honor debuted in the city, and the opening match sent out heavyweight champion Nigel McGuinness to take on Delirious. He should have received a hero's welcome from the crowd, but instead he was met with boos.

And it wasn't the first time.The



Nigel
McGUINNESS
RING OF HONOR
ROH
WRESTLING CHAMPION

A dream was realized for Ring of Honor loyalist Nigel McGuinness when he won the ROH title in October, but the fairytale soon ended as the Brit's once-loyal fan base turned against the champion for holding on to the title while recovering from concussions. Now McGuinness might make those same fans regret being so quick to judge.

Nigel McGuinness was flying high following his title win over Takeshi Morishima at "Undeniable" in October. Even the mammoth Morishima congratulated McGuinness on an impressive win. But since then, the fans don't consider the ROH heavyweight champion to be very honorable.

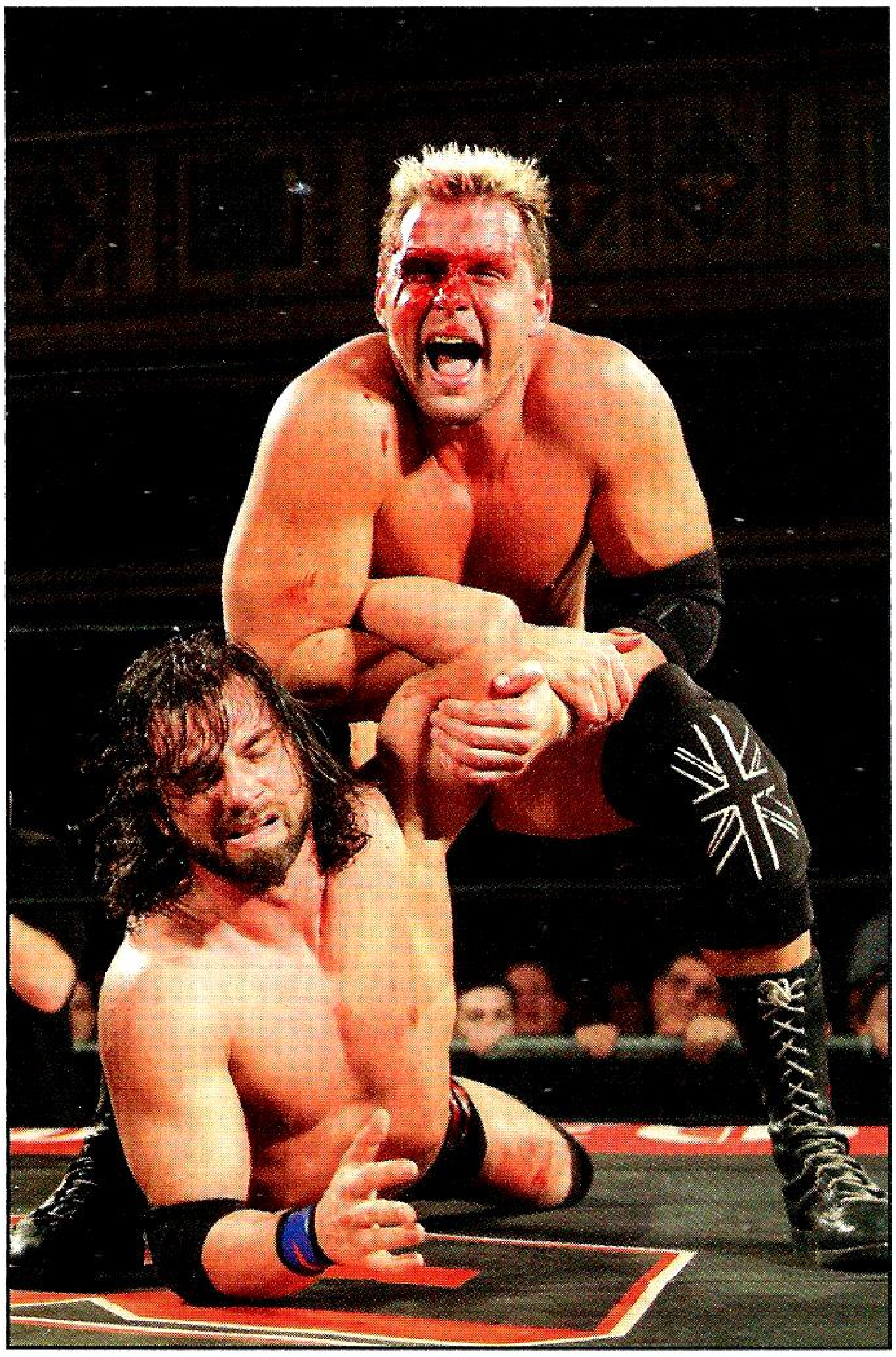
negative reaction from the fans has followed McGuinness for months as fans have questioned whether their champion possesses that all-important "H" in ROH—honor. Even worse, some wonder whether the once-popular Brit possesses an even more important "H."

"He's got no heart," said ROH fan Justin Mackenzie, who loudly booed the champion from his ringside seat at the Orlando Sports and Recreation Complex. "I wonder what we ever saw in this guy."

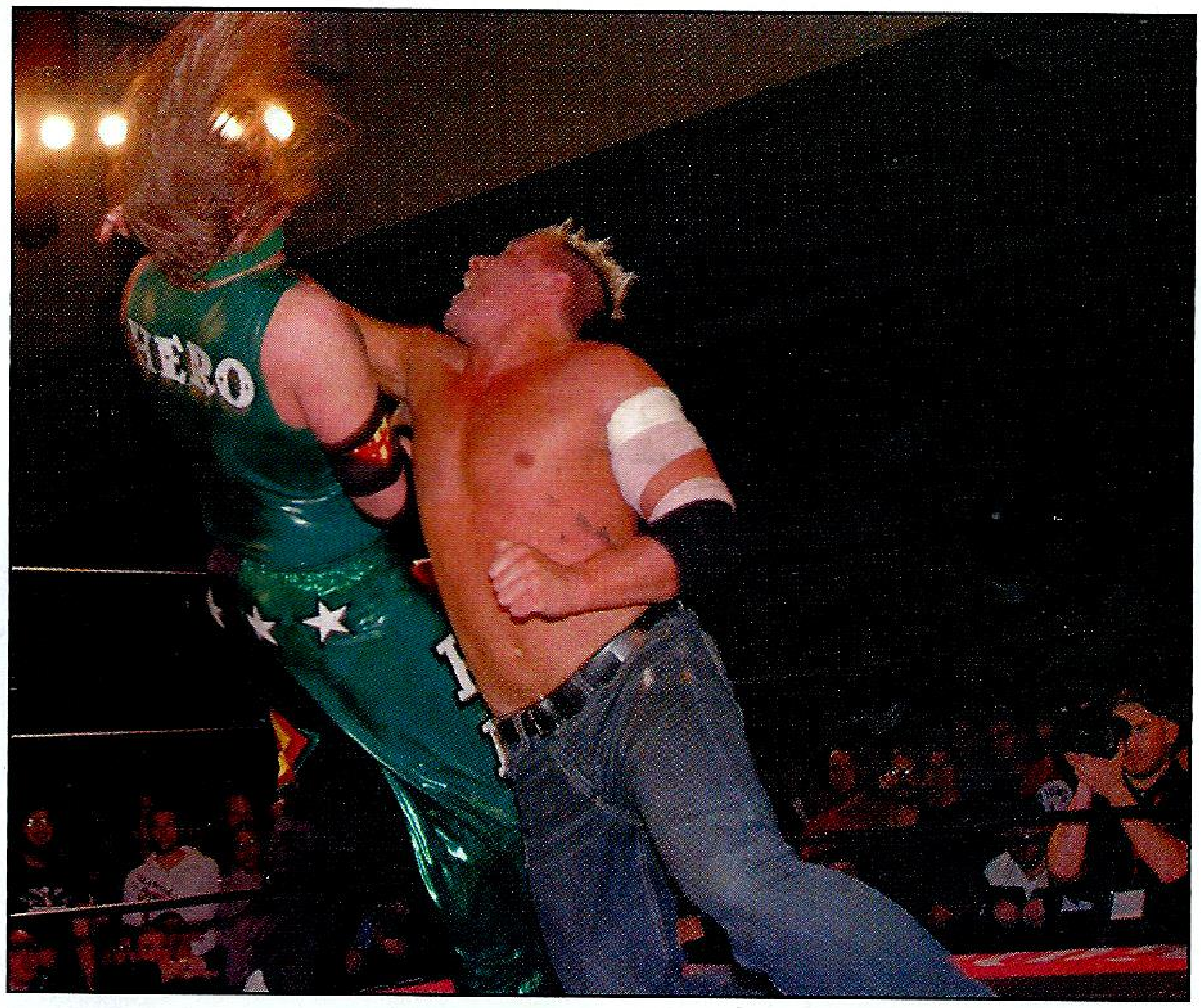
But while it is not uncommon in the colorful world of pro wrestling for a fan favorite to change his stripes right in front of fans' eyes, the undoubtedly talented McGuinness insists nothing has changed on his part. Rather, McGuinness says if anybody has "turned"—it's many of the fickle ROH fans.

"It's the old 'Damned if you do. Damned if you don't.' I've been busting my bloody tail as hard as I ever have—maybe even harder—since winning this title. But lately, it's like nothing I do is good enough," McGuinness said over a pint at an Orlando pub hours after being saluted with catcalls for defeating Delirious. "Maybe I'm losing patience with the fans these days, but who can blame me?"

For McGuinness, the honeymoon was over almost as soon as it began. After years of earning fans' respect through his never-say-die spirit, ROH enthusiasts exploded in cheers when he beat Takeshi Morishima for



Despite suffering a head-on collision with the ringside barrier, a bloody McGuinness managed to defend his title against Austin Aries at "Rising Above" in New York on December 29, 2007 (left). But the impact caused a concussion and McGuinness decided against competing the following night at "Final Battle" (above). The fans responded to his announcement with boos.



McGuinness' desire to be a fighting champ led to an ill-advised comeback against Chris Hero in November. Although he put off arm surgery for the sake of a quicker return to the ring, ROH fans are now questioning the heavyweight champion's heart.

the heavyweight title last October. Similarly, McGuinness' lockerroom colleagues were thrilled for him, and ran to the ring to celebrate the victory. Even the menacing former champion, Morishima, congratulated McGuinness.

But just a week later, McGuinness suffered a torn biceps that, despite his attempts to wrestle through the injury, forced the new champion to the sidelines for two months. For fans excited about a new era in ROH history, McGuinness' hiatus was disappointing and frustrating.

"What did they want from me? I would have been happy to go out there and defend that title with one arm, but what kind of matches would those be?" McGuinness said, slamming down his mug. "Nevertheless, I chose against getting the surgery I needed just so I could be back in the ring within two months. And what did that get me?"

The setback would be only the first to try fans' patience. Weeks into his return, McGuinness suffered a concussion when his head was driven into the steel ringside barrier during a title defense against Austin Aries.

As a precaution, McGuinness chose against competing the following night in New York at ROH's final show of the year. McGuinness' choice that night proved to be the breaking point for many fans, who openly booed him and chanted, "Drop the title!" when he walked to the ring to explain his decision.

Ironically, just as many fans decided that night that they were through with McGuinness, so did McGuinness decide that he was through with the fans. In a memorable tirade, a flustered McGuinness told his detractors that he planned to hold on to the belt just to spite them. The rhetoric continued when McGuinness wrote an open letter to fans that was published on www.wrestlingobserver.com

From that point forward, McGuinness was a changed man, motivated less by fan approval and more by simply spiting them and keeping the ROH heavyweight title by any means necessary.

That was the case when McGuinness returned to New York two months later for a highly anticipated title defense against longtime rival "American Dragon" Bryan Danielson. Early in the night, McGuinness came out to the ring and hinted that he was, once again, considering taking the night off because of the fragile state of his head and his history of concussions.

Eager to get his title shot, Danielson went as far as to promise McGuinness that he would not deliver any head shots in their encounter. McGuinness agreed to the stipulation. When match time came, Danielson honored his promise, even at the expense of putting the champion away with his patented flurry of elbows to his opponent's skull. But in return, McGuinness showed a side of him not seen in a long time—opportunistic, and even slimy.

First, he tried walking out of the match—only to be forced back to the ring by several other wrestlers. Then McGuinness actually pummeled Danielson with the same barrage of elbow strikes to the head that Danielson promised not to use. But, as low as McGuinness' tactics were, they proved successful.

"There are some guys in the locker room that I like and some I dislike. But regardless, I pride myself on respecting every man who steps in the ring with me," Danielson later said. "That night, I lost some respect for Nigel. And I don't blame fans for doing the same."

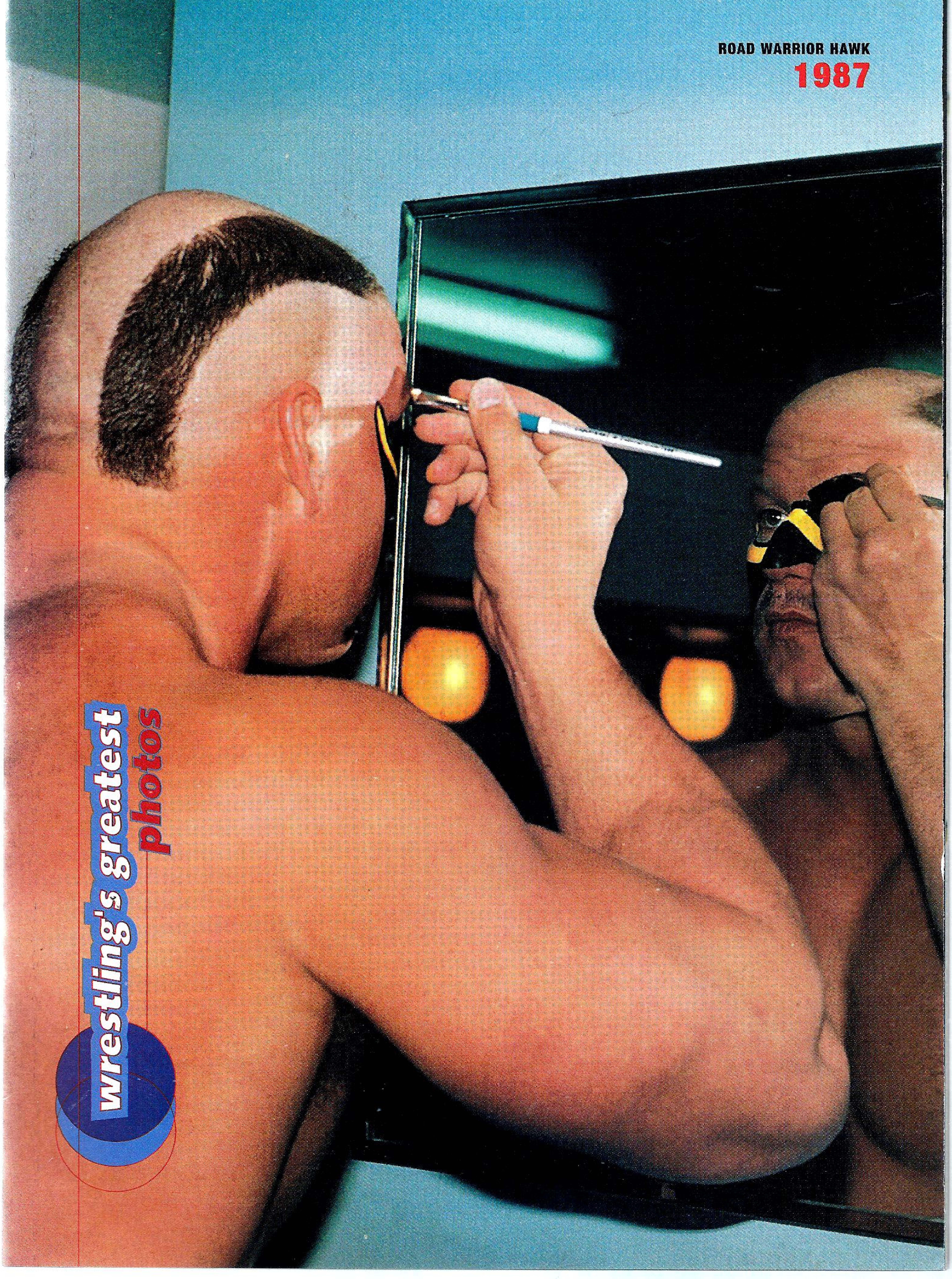
Sadly, McGuinness' questionable sincerity in recent months has served to disguise the high degree of ability and drive that still lie beneath. Even as the boos have grown louder, McGuinness has turned back challenger after challenger, including Tyler Black, Delirious, and Aries.

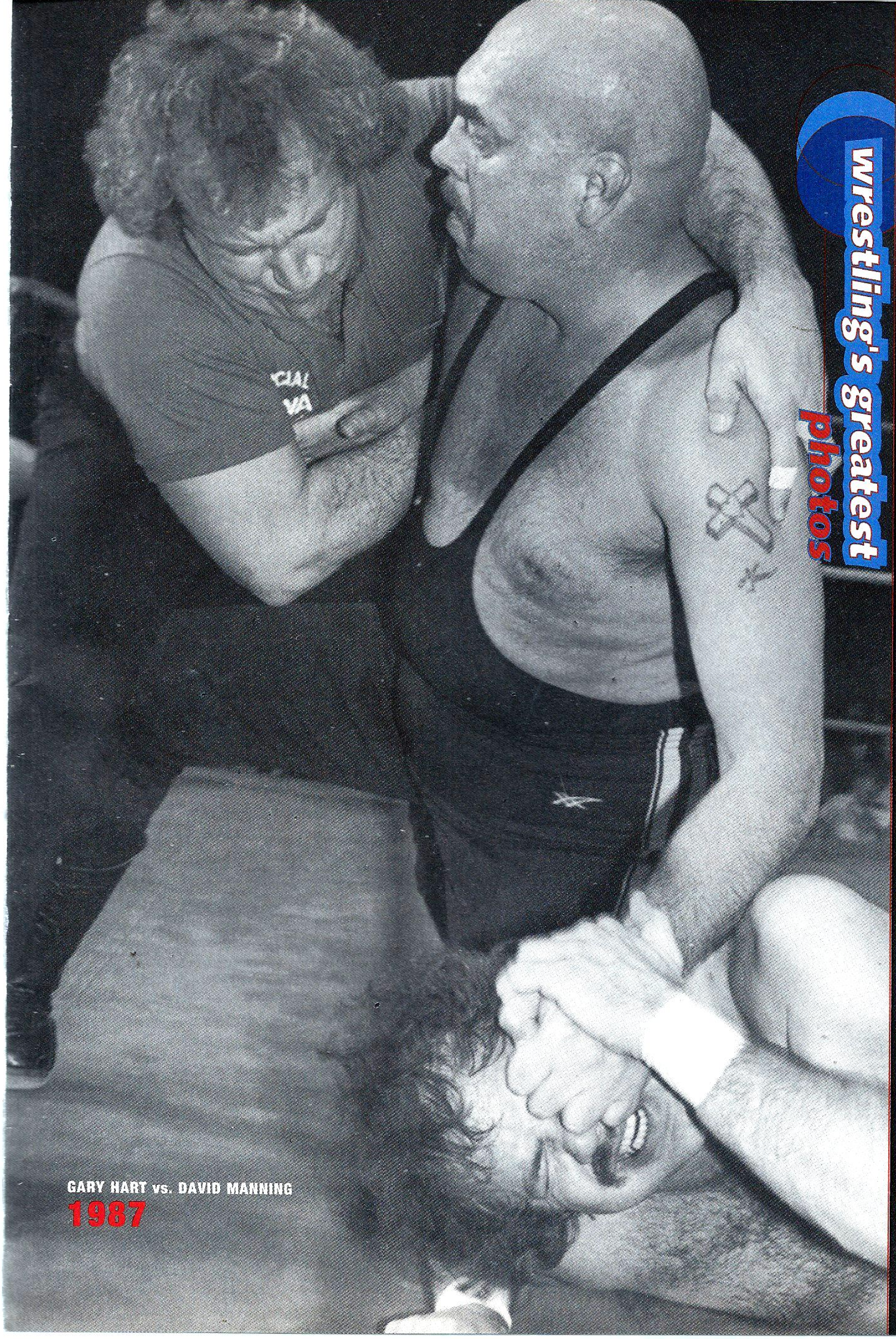
Still, it seems it may be too late for McGuinness to shift the tide of fans' growing contempt for him. Not that he's trying.

"I should be getting a damn reward for all I've done for this title. And instead all I've gotten is backlash," McGuinness said, wiping a beer mustache off of his upper lip. "You know, I'm sort of glad it's all happened this way. Now I realize what my priorities are. And fans aren't one of them." □

ROAD WARRIOR HAWK

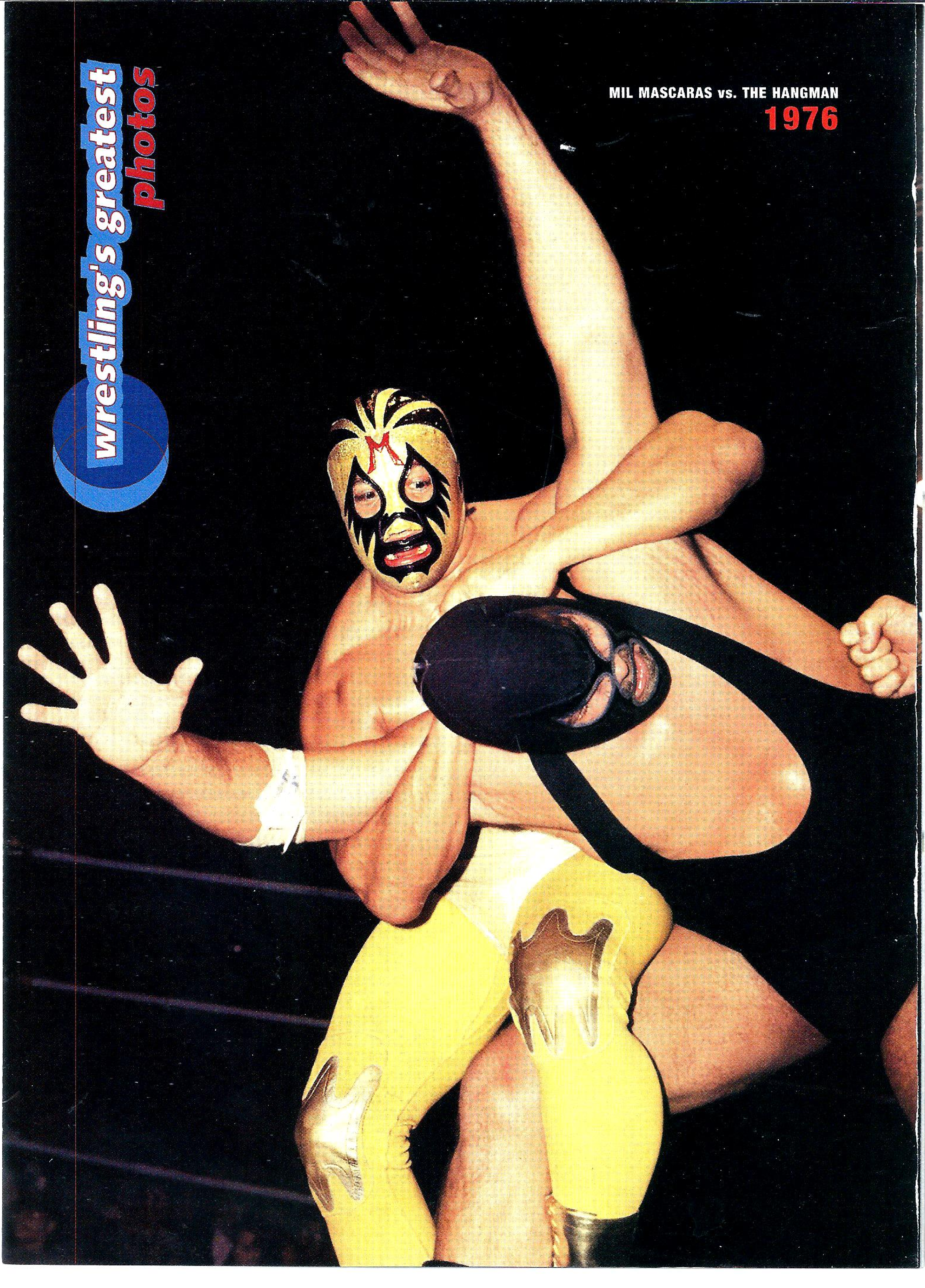
1987





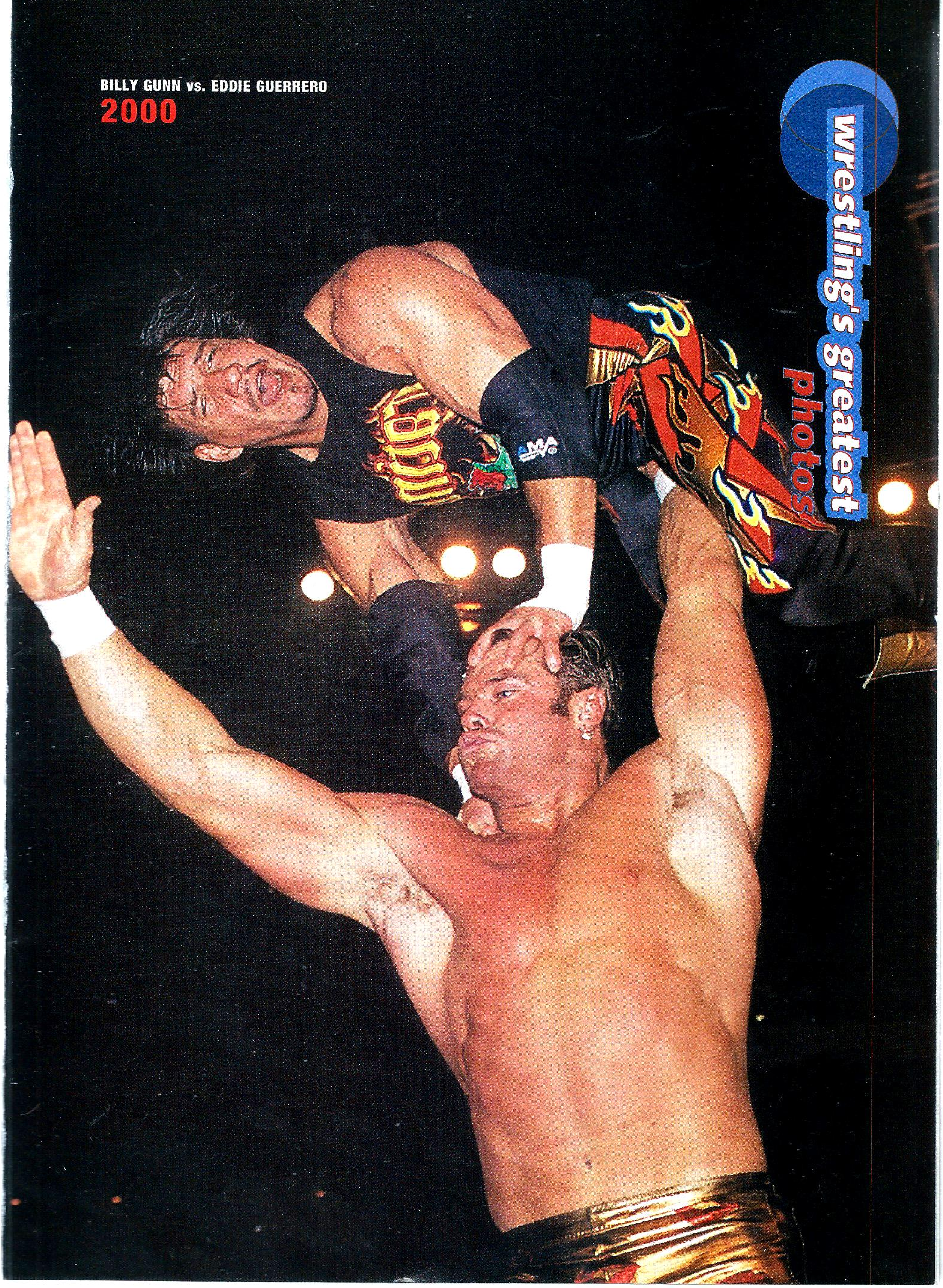
GARY HART vs. DAVID MANNING

1987



MIL MASCARAS vs. THE HANGMAN

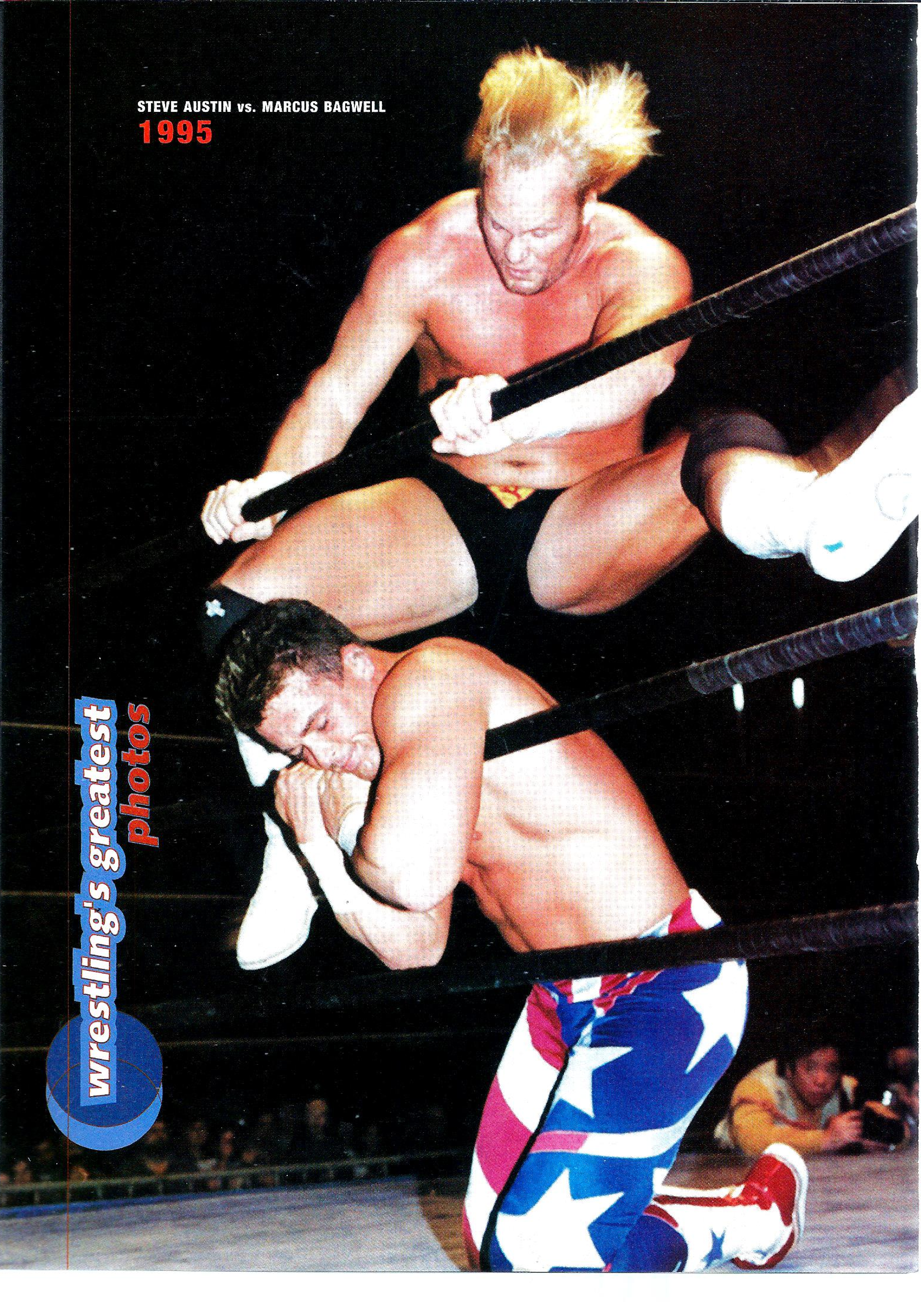
1976



BILLY GUNN vs. EDDIE GUERRERO

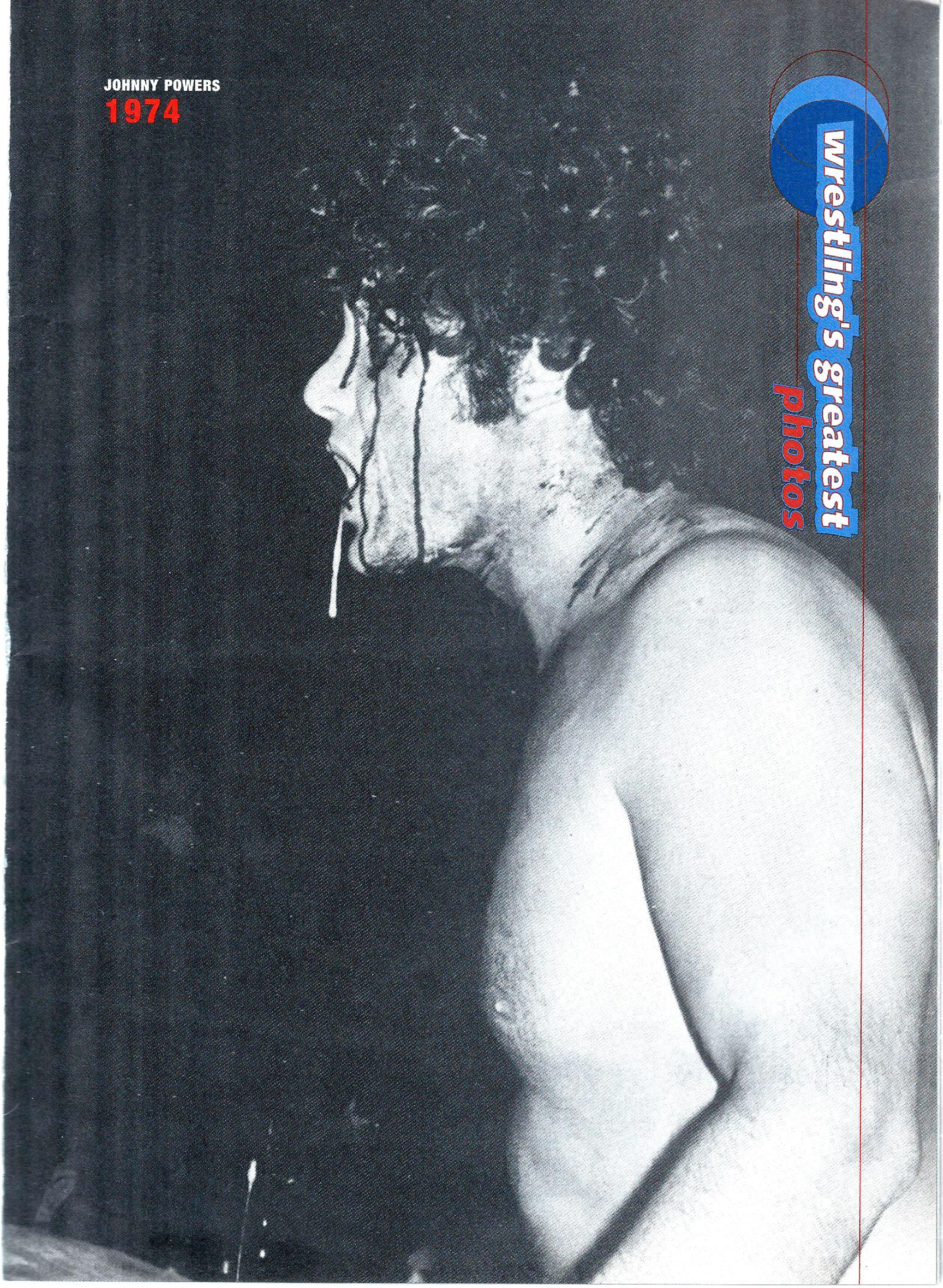
2000

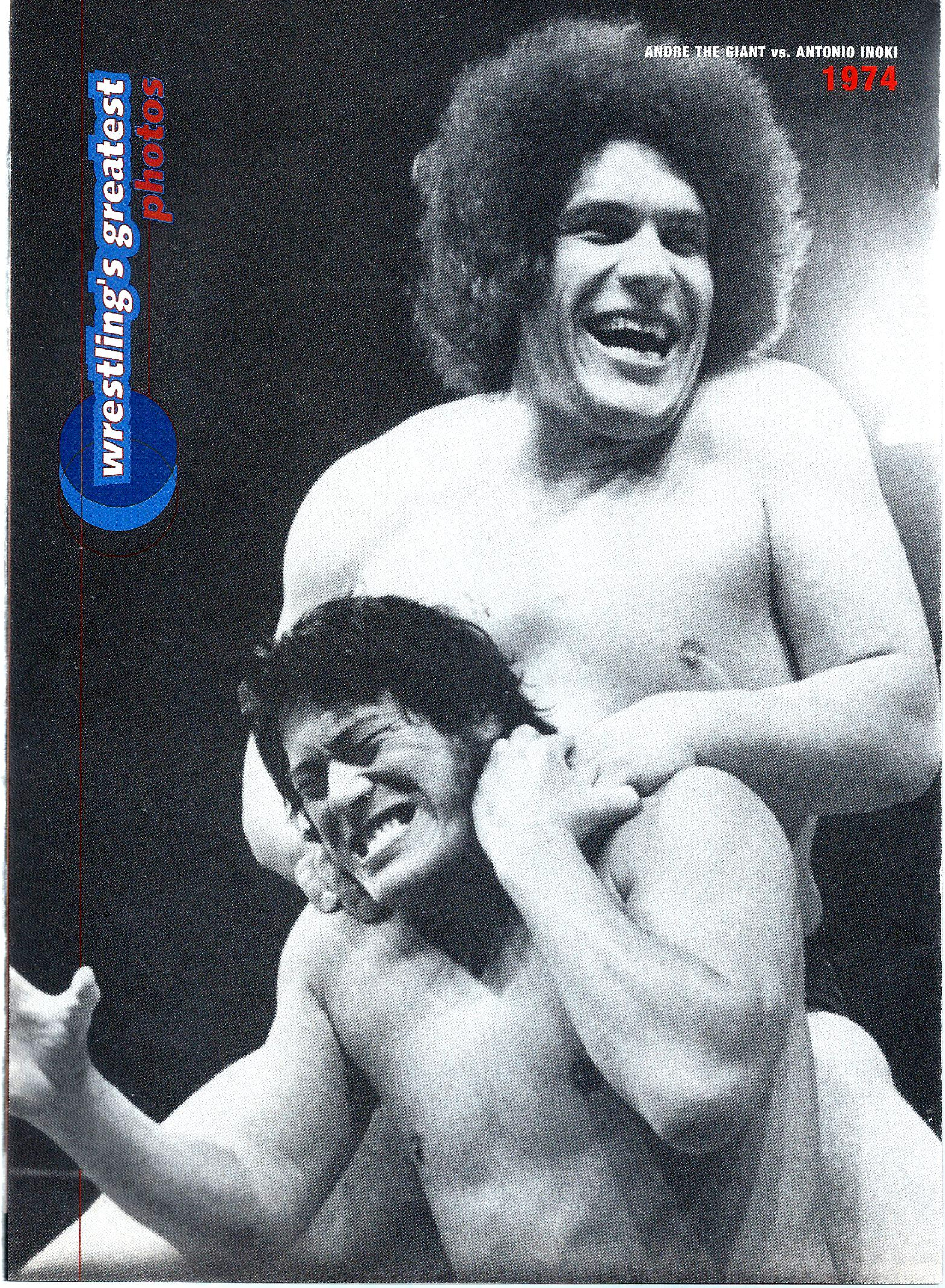
wrestling's greatest
photos



STEVE AUSTIN vs. MARCUS BAGWELL

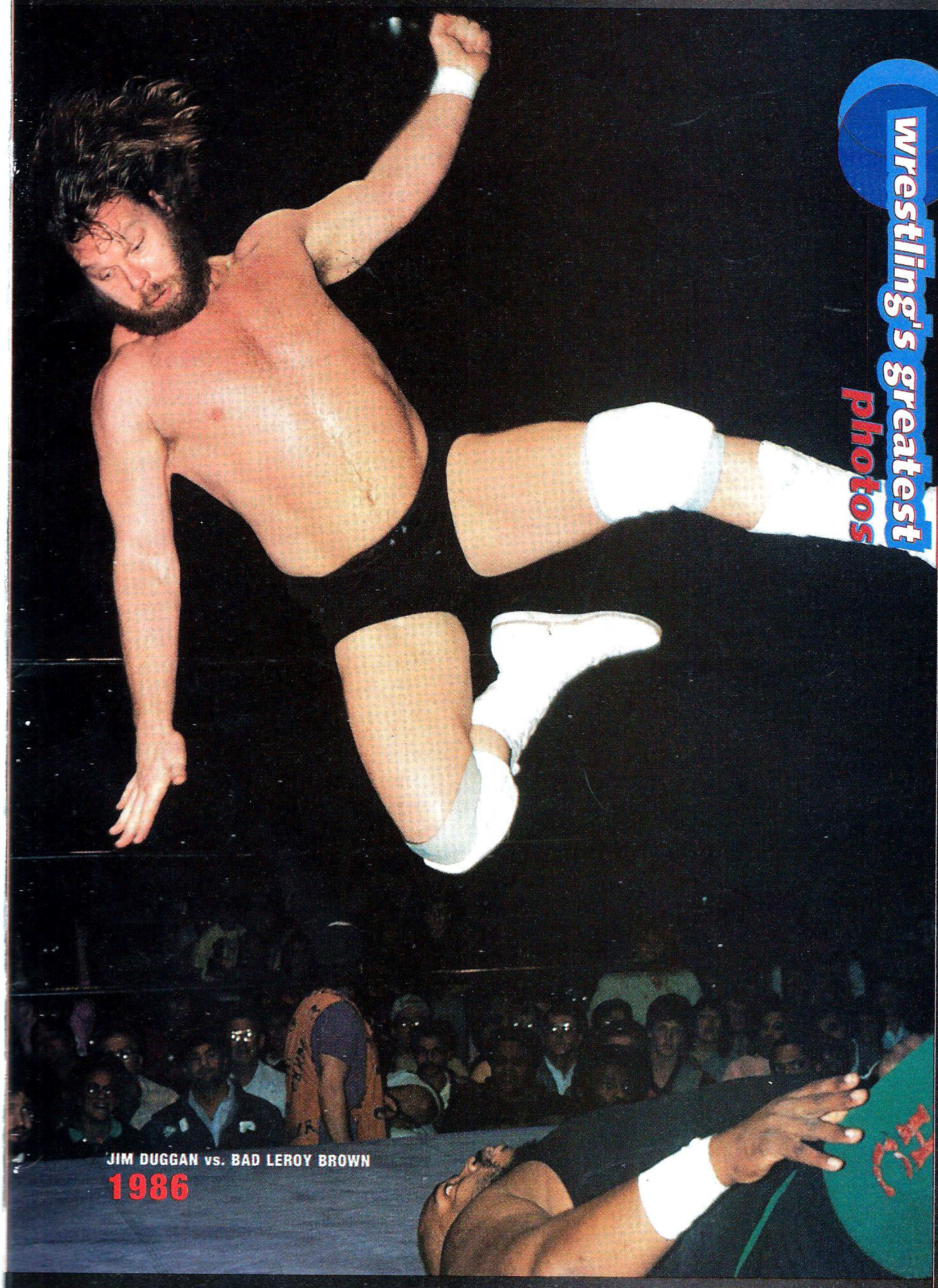
1995


JOHNNY POWERS
1974



ANDRE THE GIANT vs. ANTONIO INOKI

1974



JIM DUGGAN vs. BAD LEROY BROWN

1986

Gail Kim

"I'll never get to a point where I've accomplished enough to be content"

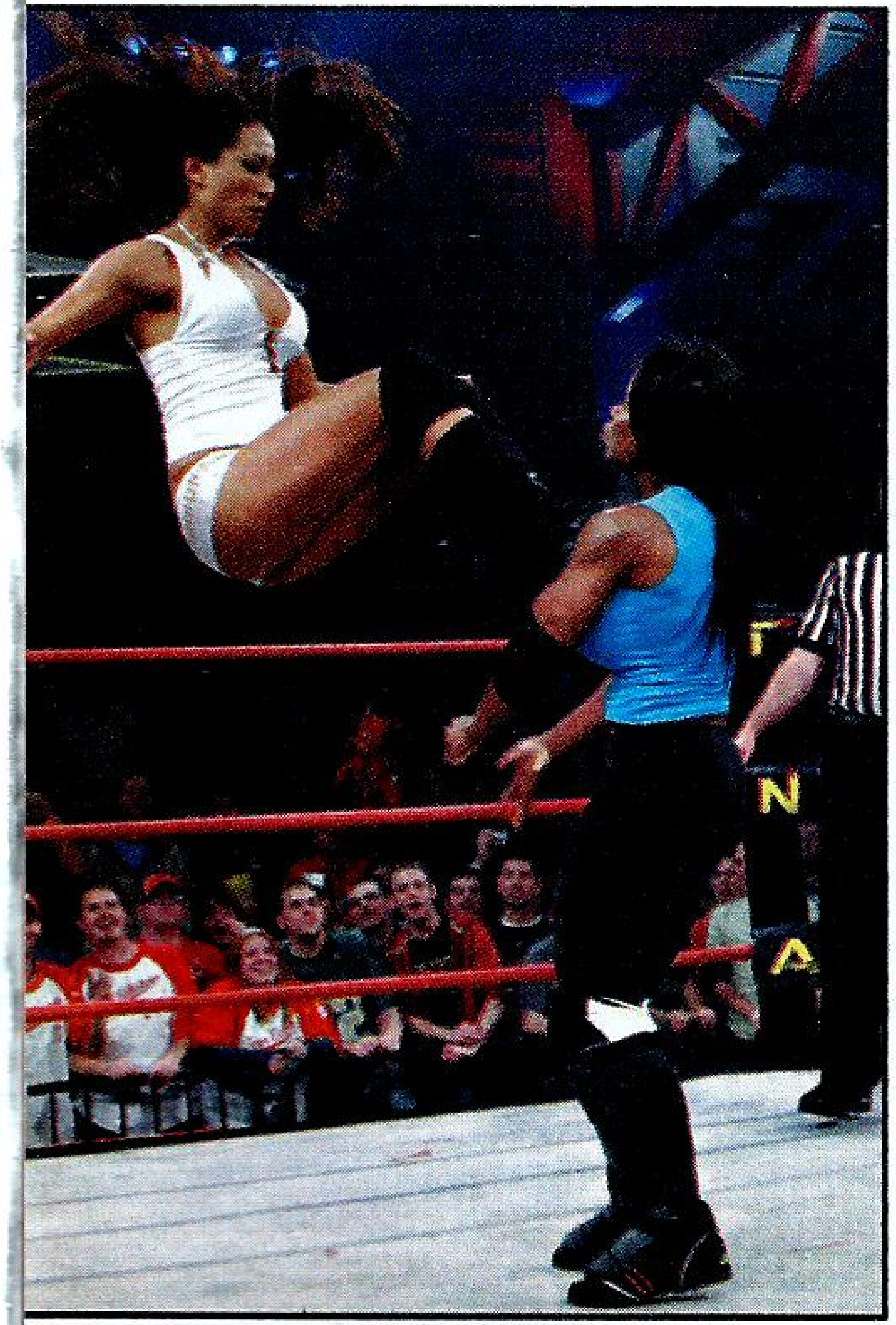
AFTER A VERY promising start to what could have been a long and fruitful relationship with WWE, Gail Kim was suddenly released only two years after winning the women's championship in her debut match. Shockingly, the woman considered by many to be one of the top female wrestlers at that time was a free agent with enough exposure to make her a very valuable commodity.

Bouncing around indy promotions across three continents for some time following her WWE release, Kim finally found a home with TNA in 2005, aligning with Jeff Jarrett and America's Most Wanted. Not one to fall into the role of simply being the beautiful accomplice to her peers' antics, Kim was quick to mix things up in the ring whenever she saw an opening.

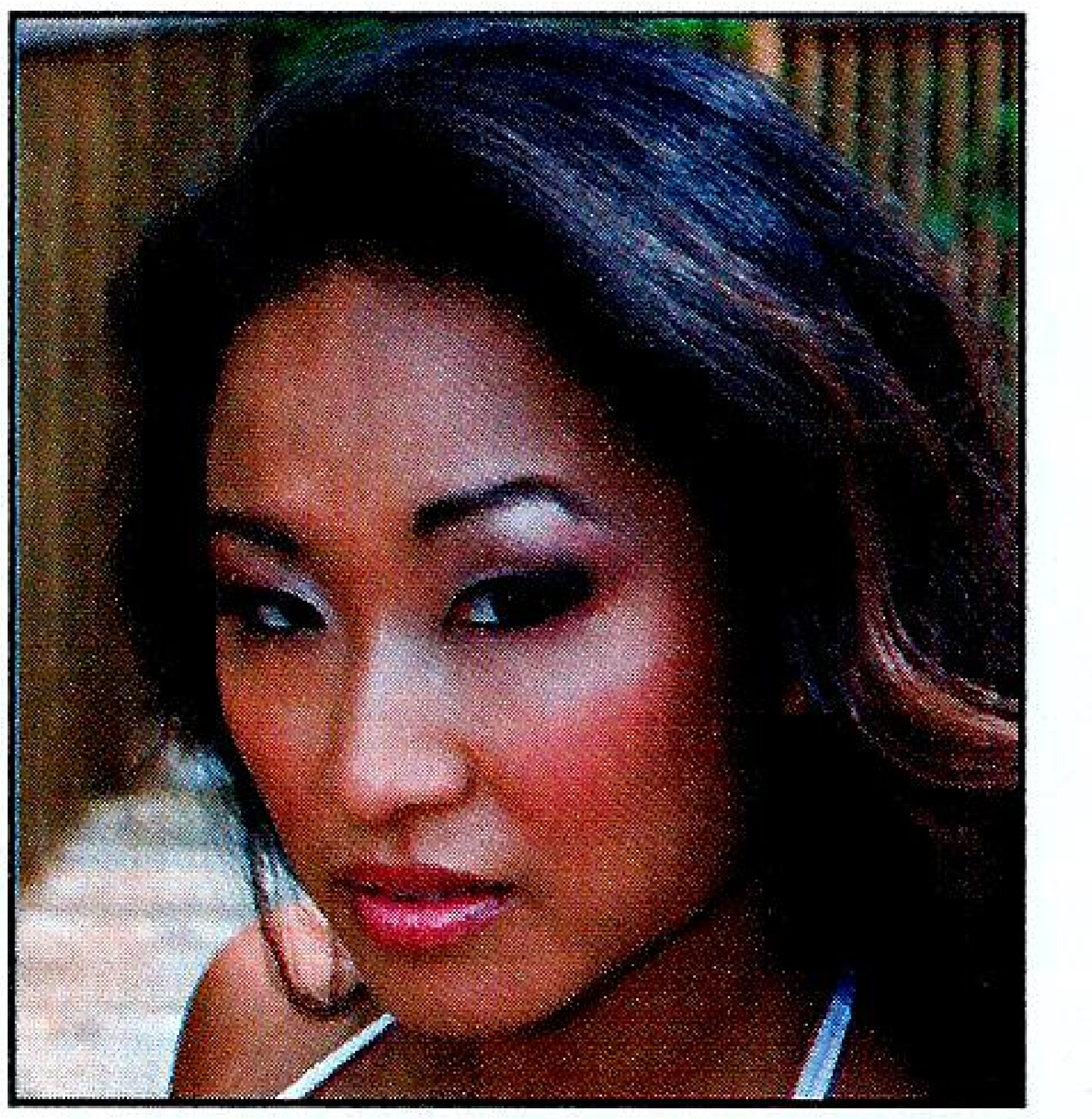
Yet without a viable women's division in place, there wasn't much for Kim to do as far as legitimate, sanctioned competition.

Fortunately for Kim, TNA gradually put in place the foundation for a women's division. Kim would emerge as the first-ever TNA Knockouts champion, winning the gold at the promotion's Bound For Glory pay-per-view in October 2007.

Since then, Kim has remained exactly where she has always expected herself to be: as one of the elite female wrestlers in the industry. Kim spoke with Contributing Writer Matt Brock about everything from capturing TNA championship gold to what she'll do after wrestling.



Gail Kim's lean physique lends itself perfectly to her exciting aerial attack. Here, she plants two feet in Jacqueline's chest. While some of the TNA Knockouts feature a power-based repertoire, Kim is a bit more well-rounded.



"I'm confident in my abilities, and I know how hard I worked and trained to get to that point, but when you actually win the gold, it's a completely different experience than you ever anticipated."

Q: Miss Kim, my sincerest thanks to you for taking the time to discuss your career. You've gone through a lot during your career—from the low of injuries to the high of championship victory. Is this how you saw things playing out?

A: First, please call me Gail. There's no need for formalities here, Matt. I'd have to say the ride has been something of a surprise for me. I always believed that, if I worked hard and didn't get down when things got difficult, I could be one of the best in the sport. It's taken me a while to get to this place, but for the first time in a long time I'm very pleased at what I've been able to accomplish with TNA.

Q: Now, your first big break in this business came as a result of hard work and preparation. Your debut match when you were with WWE saw you leave the ring as women's champion after a seven-woman battle royal.

Photos By Lee South/TNA Wrestling

> ***"Because of my ring style, I've been beaten up like you wouldn't believe. From my broken collarbone to concussions, I can attest to the roughness of the sport."***

Tell me a little about what went through your head when your hand was raised?

A: Wow, nothing really could have prepared me for that feeling. I'm confident in my abilities, and I know how hard I worked and trained to get to that point, but when you actually win the title, it's a completely different experience than you ever anticipated. I think being able to start off like that really gave me the confidence to get through the rougher times in my career.

Q: Yeah, you had it pretty rough for a while there. Every wrestler knows two undeniable truths when they get into the business: First, injuries happen. Second, you're going to move around—a lot.

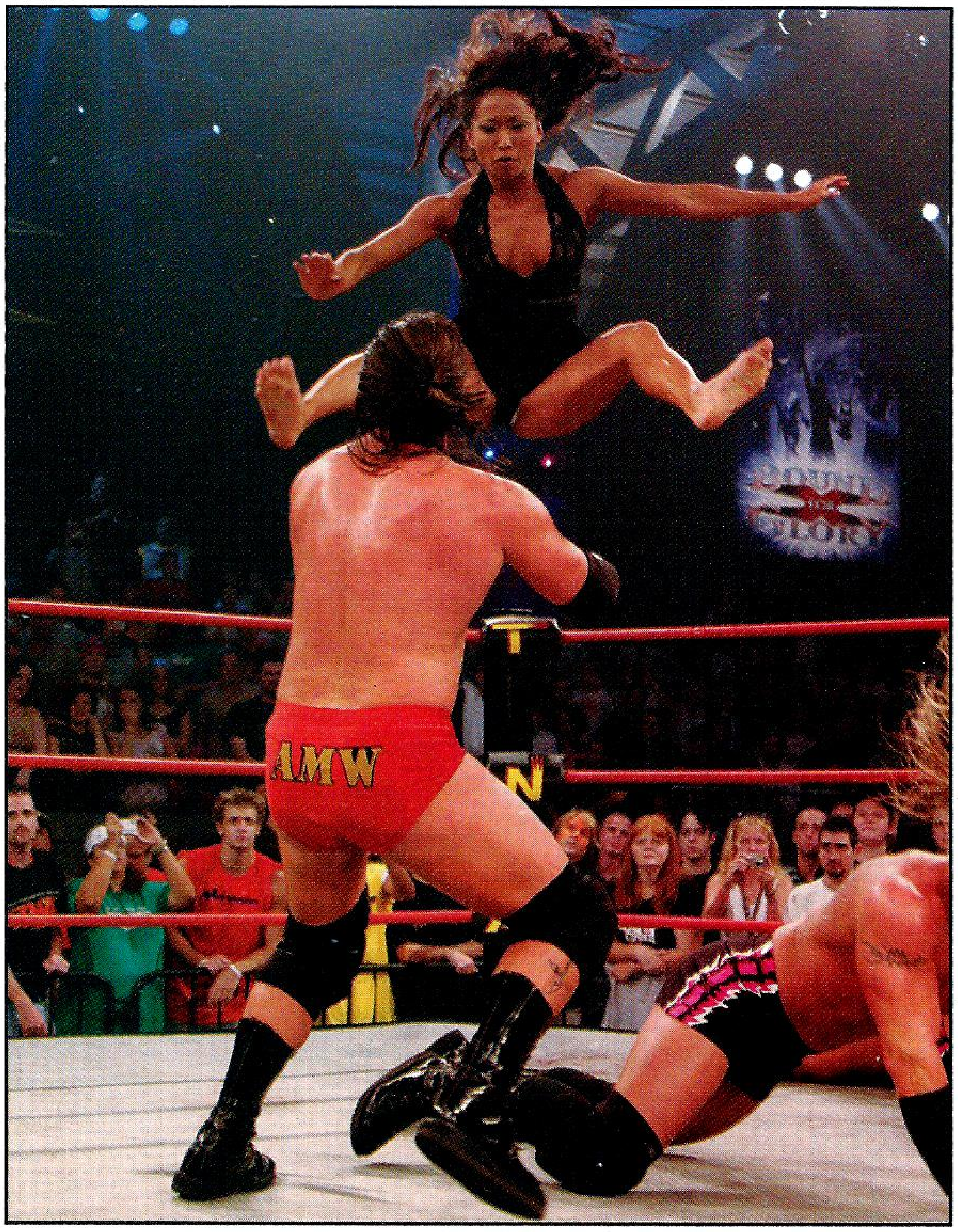
A: Oh that's absolutely correct, however there's a big difference between knowing the realities of the industry and experiencing them. Because of my ring style, I've been beaten up like you wouldn't believe. From my broken collarbone to concussions, I can attest to the roughness of the sport. And, as far as moving goes, it's just part of the business. You have to go where you're wanted and where it's the best opportunity for your career.

Q: Speaking of your ring style—what gives? I mean, you're one of the few female wrestlers I've seen that does not alter her style whether she's wrestling other women or mixing it up with the boys.

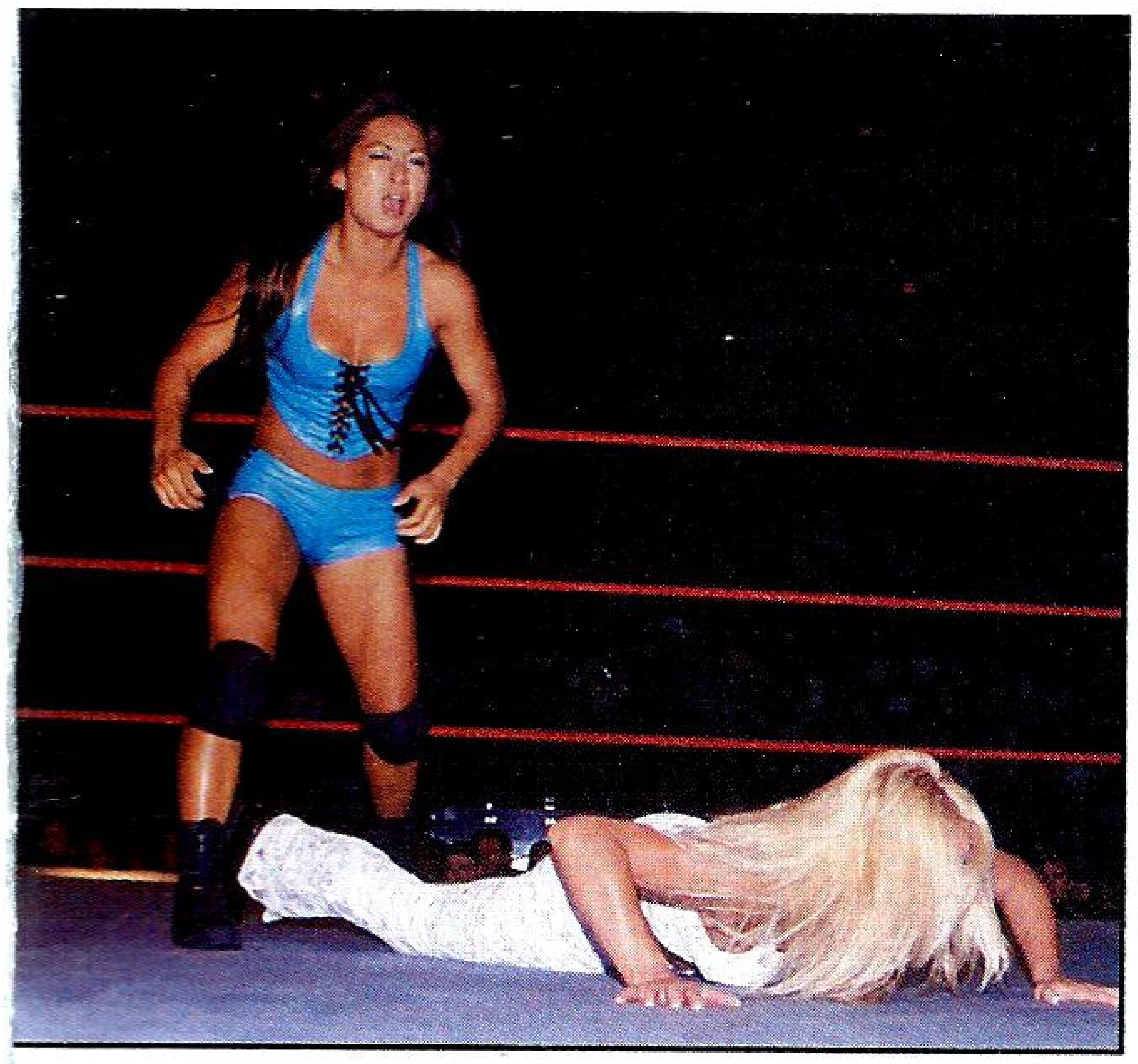
A: Well, thank you, Matt. That's exactly what I've been going for! I never really wanted to just accompany anyone to the ring. My goal was to get into TNA and hone my skills by getting involved as much as possible with the guys' matches. Consider this: I was mixing it up with people in world championship matches before the Knockouts division ever started. Where else could I get prep work like that?

Q: That's certainly a good point. Tell me a little about your thoughts on the competition within the Knockouts division. From the outside, it looks like there are a few women in there that could beat some of the men.

A: You said it, Matt. Right now, I think the Knockouts division has some of the most competitive female wrestlers in the sport today. I mean if you look at our roster, it's filled with women who



Anyone who suspects Kim's toughness is in for a rude awakening. The beautiful Knockout is no stranger to mixed-gender matches, as this high-flying maneuver against James Storm demonstrates.

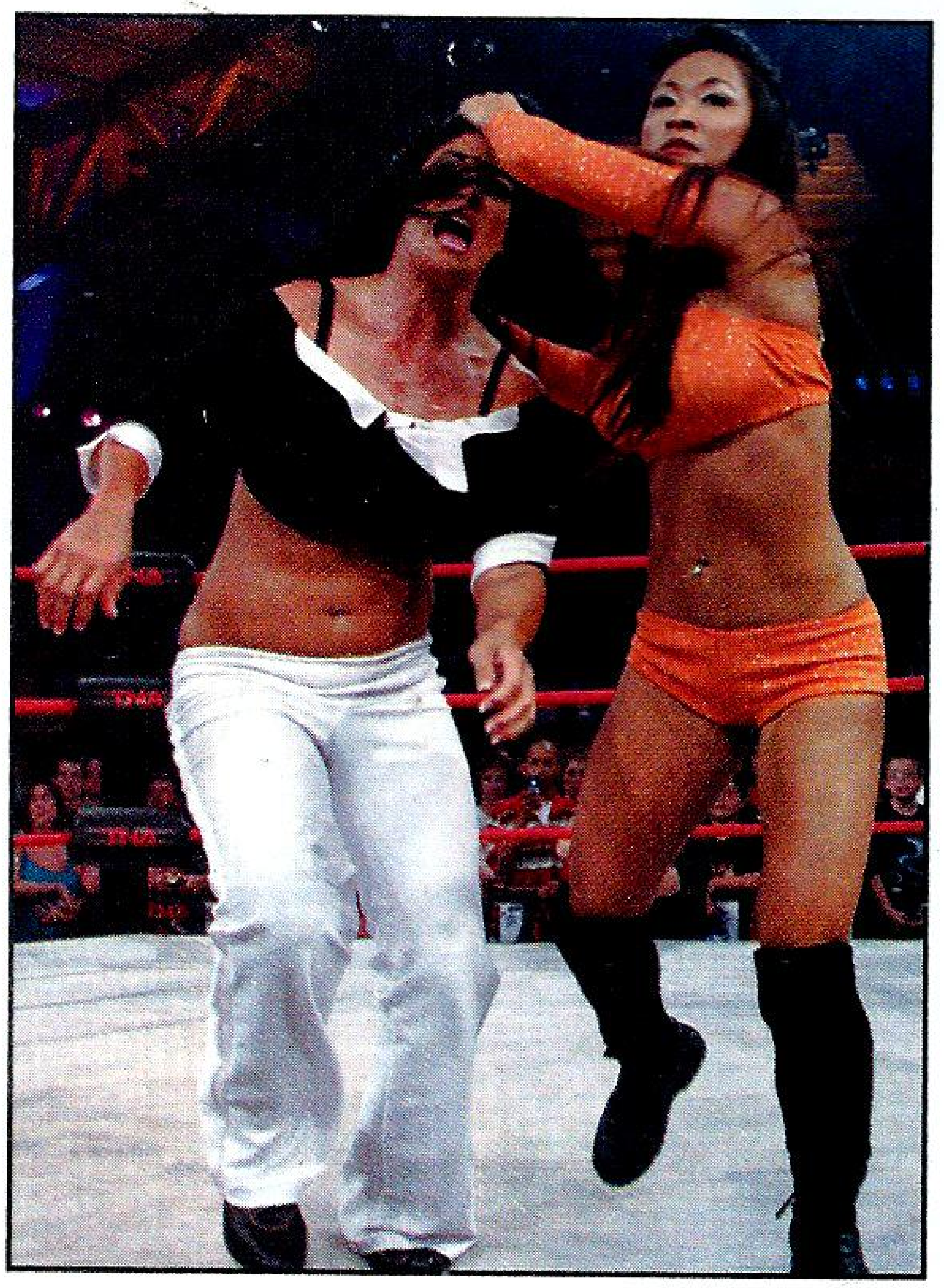


A former WWE Diva, Kim has accomplished several "firsts" in her career. Not only did she capture the WWE women's crown in her very first match with the company, she also became the first champion of TNA's Knockout division.

could conceivably win the title at any point. Right now, my biggest competition has to be ODB and Awesome Kong, and they're both as tough as they come. Just when I think I have them figured out, they do something new to throw me off. It's quickly becoming a great rivalry among all of us.

Q: Now, about this business of you being considered one of the country's "Most Eligible Bachelorettes" by *Forbes* magazine. Does it bother you when things like this—that aren't about your ring skills—come out?

A: Honestly, it's very flattering. I look at things like that as an extension of what I'm capable of doing in the ring. I mean, if it weren't for my accomplishments in TNA, would anyone even notice me enough to give me such a distinction? Who knows?



Despite an increase in the competition, Kim feels her experience and skills give her an advantage over other TNA Knockouts like Traci Brooks (pictured) and will keep her in the title race for years to come.

Q: Trust me, they'd notice you if you were flipping burgers at the local diner. You have appeared in the film *Royal Kill* and several commercials. Is wrestling a means to an end for you?

A: No, not at all. If a part is offered to me, I'd be stupid not to consider it. And, who knows, acting might be what I do when I can't do this anymore. But, right now, I love what I'm doing, and I think I'm at a really pivotal time where, if I continue to focus on growing as a wrestler, I could end up where I'd like to be when all is said and done.

Q: And that is ... ?

"My biggest competition has to be ODB and Awesome Kong. Just when I think I have them figured out, they do something new to throw me off."

A: One of the best of all-time. I think people who get into this sport and say they're just happy to be a part of the industry are cheating themselves. For me, every day is a challenge and even though I consider myself fortunate to be a part of such a great business, I'll never get to a point where I've accomplished enough to be content. I know I can do so much more.

Q: What is the next step for Gail Kim? You've been to the top of the mountain in TNA, so where do you go from here?

A: My personal goal is to regain the Knockouts championship and hold it for a very long time. Winning the title is hard enough, but reigning as a fighting champion is even tougher. I'd also like to impart some of the wisdom I've gained from the sport to the next generation of female wrestlers. We need to continue to grow the talent pool of future Knockouts.

Q: Thank you very much, Miss Kim ... sorry ... Gail. Best of luck moving forward, although I'm thinking I should offer that sentiment to your opponents. □

editors' roundtable

TNA has become a cast of characters—to a fault

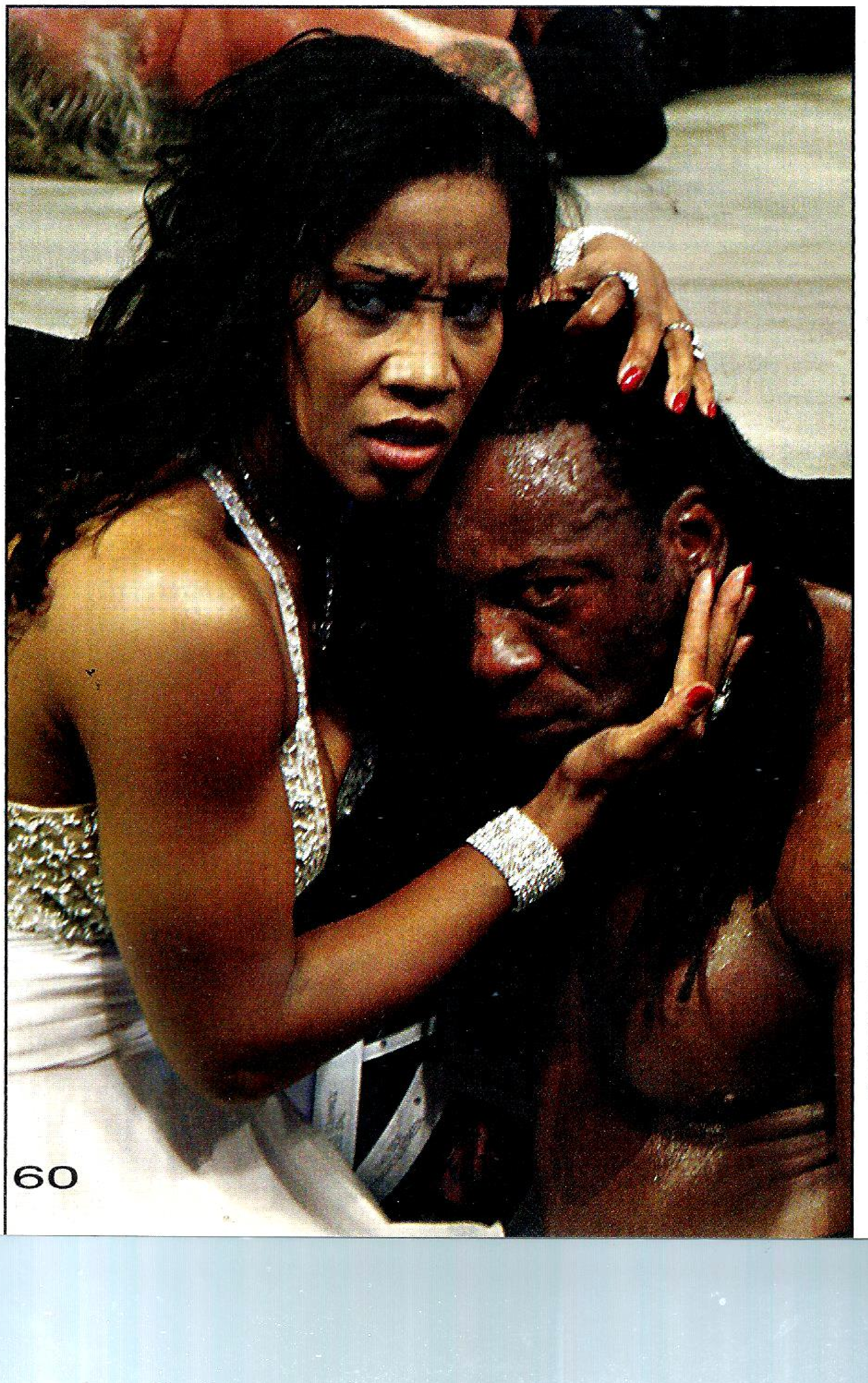
> **"The only meaningful storylines in WWE involve the top-tier stars, and anyone below the level of say, Jeff Hardy, are just bodies to feed the main-event monsters like Cena, Orton, Triple-H, Undertaker, and Batista. I don't think WWE's mid-card storylines are any better than TNA's."**
>
> **—Dave Lenker**

CALL IT "A male soap opera," "crash TV," or even Vince Russo run amuck. Once criticized for its lack of identity, TNA has embraced a definite philosophy—whether you love it or hate it—regarding character development. Russo, TNA's current creative head, was credited for helping launch the WWF's "Attitude" era in the late-1990s and is often blamed for helping to ensure WCW's demise when he became that company's creative director in 1999.

TNA executives are playing down Russo's influence, usually insisting that a group of company employees—ranging from Russo and minority co-owner Jeff Jarrett to Mike Tenay and Jeremy Borash—have input in the creative process. Even if that is true, Russo's hallmarks have come to predominate TNA during the past year: the increased number of women, every mid-carder receiving a gimmick, and an emphasis on backstage happenings over in-ring action.

Indeed, it could be said that Total Nonstop Action has become Total Nonstop Talking. But no one can argue with the improvement in TNA's ratings. ***Impact*** *routinely scores anywhere between a 1.1 and 1.3 each week. Some weeks, it scores higher than ECW. TNA claims this is proof its creative approach is working. Critics suggest* ***Impact****'s two-hour prime-time slot on Spike TV is responsible for the increase, and that the Russo approach is hindering TNA more than helping it.*

Our "Editors' Roundtable" panel unanimously agreed that TNA suffers from poor character development. Some questions remained, however. What is TNA's current creative approach lacking? And what makes TNA any worse than WWE? Publisher Stu Saks, Contributing Editor Dave Lenker, Senior Writer Harry Burkett, and Contributing Writer Matt Brock offer their opinions.



Is this TNA 2008 or WCW 2000? Our calendar says the former, but so much is similar about the two products, like Booker T and Paisl—*err*, we mean Sharmell. Is Vince Russo to blame or is it the fault of the company as a whole?

The gimmick character is a great way to get viewers to notice mid-card wrestlers. But what WWE knows and TNA doesn't is that the gimmick can only take a character so far. There comes a time when "Black Machismo" has to leave "Macho Man" behind and let the supremely talented Jay Lethal shine through on his own.

STU SAKS: Before we even begin this "Roundtable," we all agree that we don't like TNA's creative philosophy as of late. I'd like to open this up to a more nuanced discussion of how TNA can improve its creative product, and how all of this relates to the standard that WWE has already set. Dave, where would you like to begin?

DAVE LENKER: Yikes. Where to begin? Whenever I watch *Impact*, I feel like I'm watching *Monday Nitro* from 2000. I'm half-expecting to see Sharmell go back to her old name, Paisley, and walk The Artist Formerly Known As Booker T to the ring. Where's Kwee-Wee? Where's General Rection? There's no doubt in my mind that Russo has full control over TNA Creative. I know Harry is looking forward to talking about Vince Russo again.

HARRY BURKETT: I often think of the year 2000 as providing the most fodder for my columns, mainly because Vince Russo's creative and booking philosophy was full of so many gaps, inconsistencies, and illogic. I could easily burn through 1,000 words and not even scratch the surface. But I don't have it in me to go after Russo with the same gusto again. Russo is making the same tired mistakes, so that means I'd have to go through the same tired criticisms again.

MATT BROCK: Russo has worn me out, too. That guy should go back to his record store, or whatever business he opened after he made all that money in WCW.

SAKS: Hold on, here. I don't want this to turn into a Russo-bashing session. Instead of attacking Russo personally, I'd like for us to examine his creative philosophy in the context of the modern era. Harry and Matt, if you guys had your way, Kurt Angle would only defend the TNA title in two-out-of-three-falls matches wearing wool tights. WWE's creative philosophy isn't much different from Russo's, and that company is very successful. So what gives?

LENKER: That doesn't mean WWE's creative approach is all that spectacular. The only meaningful storylines in WWE involve the top-tier stars, and anyone below the level of say, Jeff Hardy, are just bodies to feed the main-event monsters like Cena, Orton, Triple-H, Undertaker, and Batista. I don't think WWE's mid-card storylines are any better than TNA's.

SAKS: Come on, guys. All of you are doing a pretty good job of avoiding my question. Aside from money, resources, and brand visibility, what is WWE doing that is correct that TNA is doing fundamentally wrong?

BURKETT: That brings us back to the point of this "Roundtable." The storylines in both WWE and TNA are lackluster. The difference is character development. Now, I'm not saying that Raw has the character depth of *Grey's Anatomy*. Maria Kanellis is no Dr. Meredith Grey ...

LENKER: Wait a minute. I need to question you right there. *You* watch *Grey's Anatomy*?

BURKETT: I do research! Do you think I come to these "Roundtable" discussions unprepared?

SAKS: Harry, you don't even take

The politically incorrect meter is slowly nearing "intolerable" with the emergence of Raisha Saeed, Awesome Kong's valet. TNA must be careful not to offend any minority groups. The last thing the company needs is a backlash from fans.

> **"Vince Russo is brilliant when it comes to the one-night parody, the one-night potshot, the one-night joke. But he has shown a blatant inability to develop a character over the long haul and create a bona fide star."**
>
> **—Harry Burkett**

notes during editorial meetings ...

BROCK: I betcha that show doesn't hold a candle to *Dr. Kildare* ...

BURKETT: Gentlemen, to get back to my point. The problem with Vince Russo is that he assigns one-dimensional gimmicks to wrestlers, expecting that to take them to the next level. He often brags about coming up with The Rock's character. Well, maybe he came up with the rough concept, but it was Dwayne Johnson's showmanship that breathed life into that character and made it work. The Rock was an amped-up extension of Dwayne's real personality.

Take Jay Lethal. Just because Lethal can do a dead-on impersonation of Randy Savage, Russo makes that his full-time gimmick. Lethal's challenge was to take that "Black Machismo" character and evolve beyond the "Macho Man" persona. Clearly, he hasn't received any support from Creative in doing so.

LENKER: Think of what John Cena was able to do. He was a bland fan favorite until he went to that Halloween party on Smackdown, pretending to be a rapper. He was terrific. It clicked with the fans, and he used that one-dimensional gimmick to explore his own personality. Now when you think of John Cena, you don't think of the guy with the rapper gimmick. John Cena is, well, John Cena. Randy Orton is Randy Orton. What's Edge? Well, he's just Edge.

BROCK: I think the best example is The Undertaker. At one time, he was best known for putting his opponents in body bags. Now, over time, he's added layer upon layer to his persona. He's the "Dead Man." He's the "American Badass." He's "Big Evil." He's "The Phenom." He's every one of those elements rolled up into one.

SAKS: Maybe that means Russo and the rest of TNA's creative team simply need more time. It took 15 years for The Undertaker to develop the persona he has today. You mentioned Dwayne Johnson and John Cena. It sounds like they needed the one-dimensional gimmicks to evolve into something greater.

BURKETT: It's okay to use one-dimensional gimmicks if your intent is to use them almost like training wheels until a wrestler can stand on his own feet with his own unique persona. Look, Vince Russo is brilliant when it comes to the one-night parody, the one-night potshot, the one-night joke. But he has shown a blatant inability to develop a character over the long haul and create a bona fide star.

SAKS: Harry, you may have to eat your words if we're sitting here a year from now and Petey Williams is a big star.

BURKETT: Are you talking about "Maple Leaf Muscle"? Egad! How about that angle?! Whenever Petey loses a match, Scott Steiner places him in handcuffs, puts a hood over his head, and then dunks his head for some pure, innocent waterboarding!

LENKER: Don't forget Raisha Saeed.

BURKETT: You're really trying to get my blood pressure to go through the roof, aren't you, Dave? That's an obvious example of TNA exploiting the War on Terror for the sake of a bad storyline. Wasn't it much more inspiring when Petey Williams, a Canadian, saved the American flag from being burned by LAX? Do you really believe this "Maple Leaf Muscle" stuff will help Petey evolve to the next level, especially when he's allowing handcuffs to be placed on him after every match?

Now you have Raisha Saeed wearing a veil and speaking for Awesome Kong. Since when do veil-wearing Muslim women want to get involved in professional wrestling? If Rhaka Khan makes the mistake of sticking Raisha Saeed's head in a vat of water, we could have an international incident on our hands.

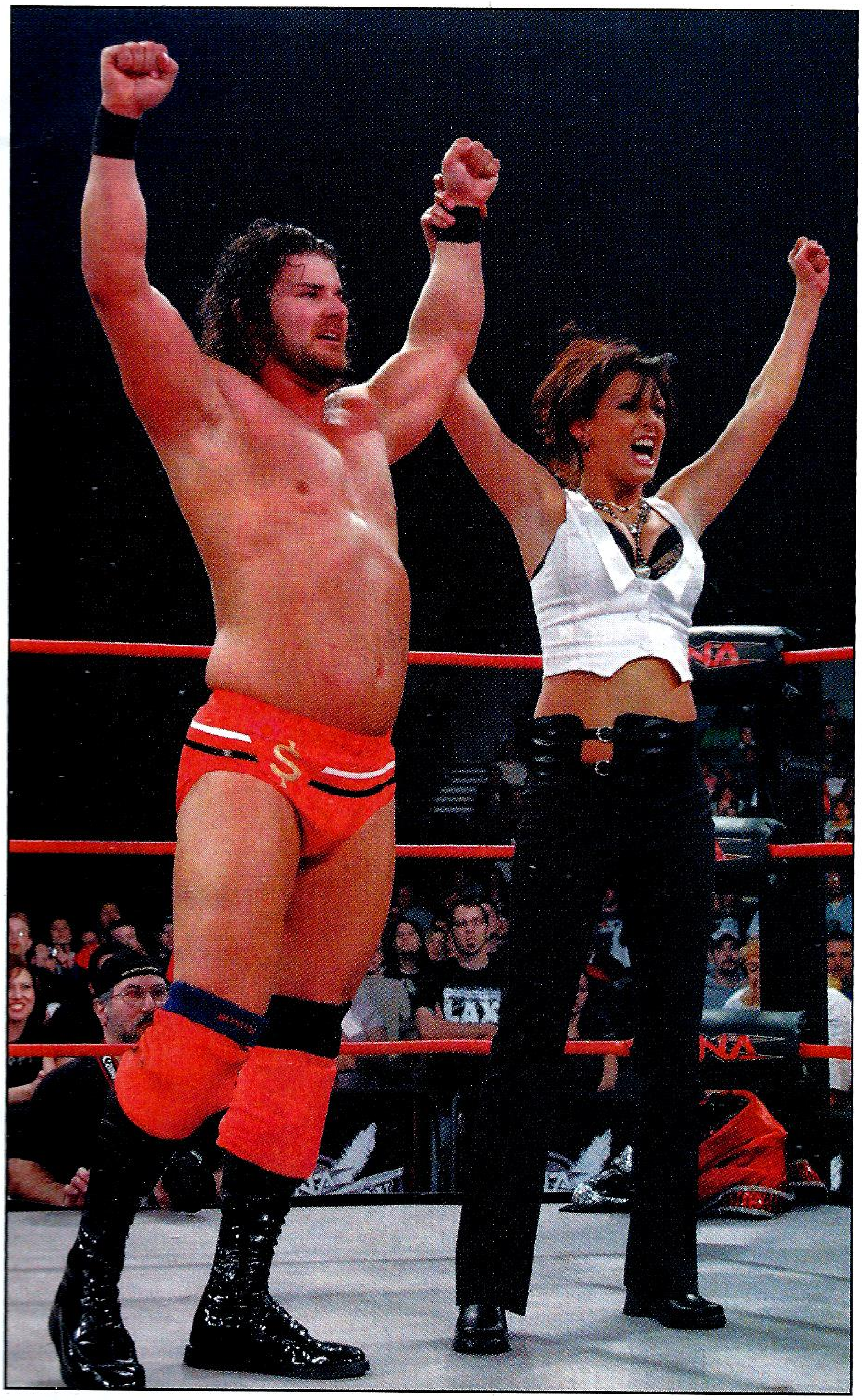
LENKER: How about all these women? Rhaka Khan with Steiner, Raisha Saeed with Kong, Roxxi Laveaux used to be with VKM, Christy Hemme is with The Rock 'n' Rave Infection, Sharmell is with Booker, Payton Banks is with Robert Roode, Karen Angle is with Kurt Angle, So Cal Val is with "Black Machismo" ... Is Russo's philosophy, "Hey, if in doubt, stick the girl with some guy"?

BROCK: This is backward! Elizabeth was put with Savage to get Savage over. Baby Doll was put with Tully Blanchard to get Tully over. Miss Sherri was put with Bobby Shane to get Bobby over. Cherie Dupre was put with Gorgeous George to get George over. What can Rhaka Khan do for Steiner? It's Midajah all over again! Thanks, Russo!

LENKER: Of course, the rumor going around is that Spike TV may be interested in a Knockouts-only wrestling show, and this is a way of hot-shotting the female talent to make the fans familiar with them. If Spike TV goes ahead with a female-only show, don't you think it will become a regular secondary show for TNA within a matter of weeks?

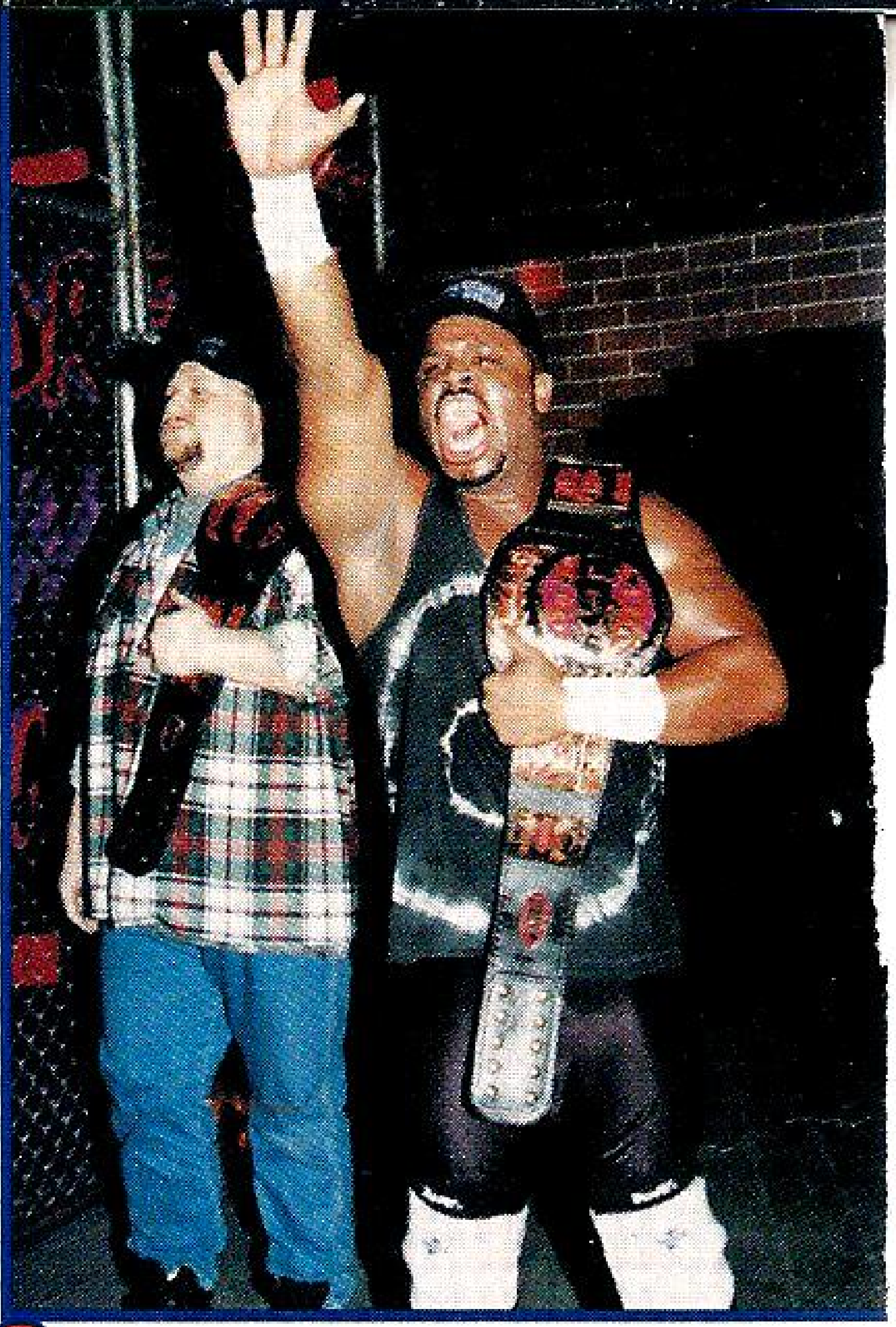
SAKS: TNA definitely has the in-ring talent to support a secondary show, but its approach to character development will definitely be a hindrance. Well, we didn't have much disagreement here, but we certainly aired some passionate views. One day, I'd like for Russo to be given the chance to air his side. Thanks, fellas.

BROCK: I need a drink. ☐



Can the TNA male superstars stand on their own or not? As soon as Robert Roode lost Traci Brooks, Payton Banks was on his hip in no time. Roode is just one of many TNA men Russo's saddled with a woman.

wrestling timeline



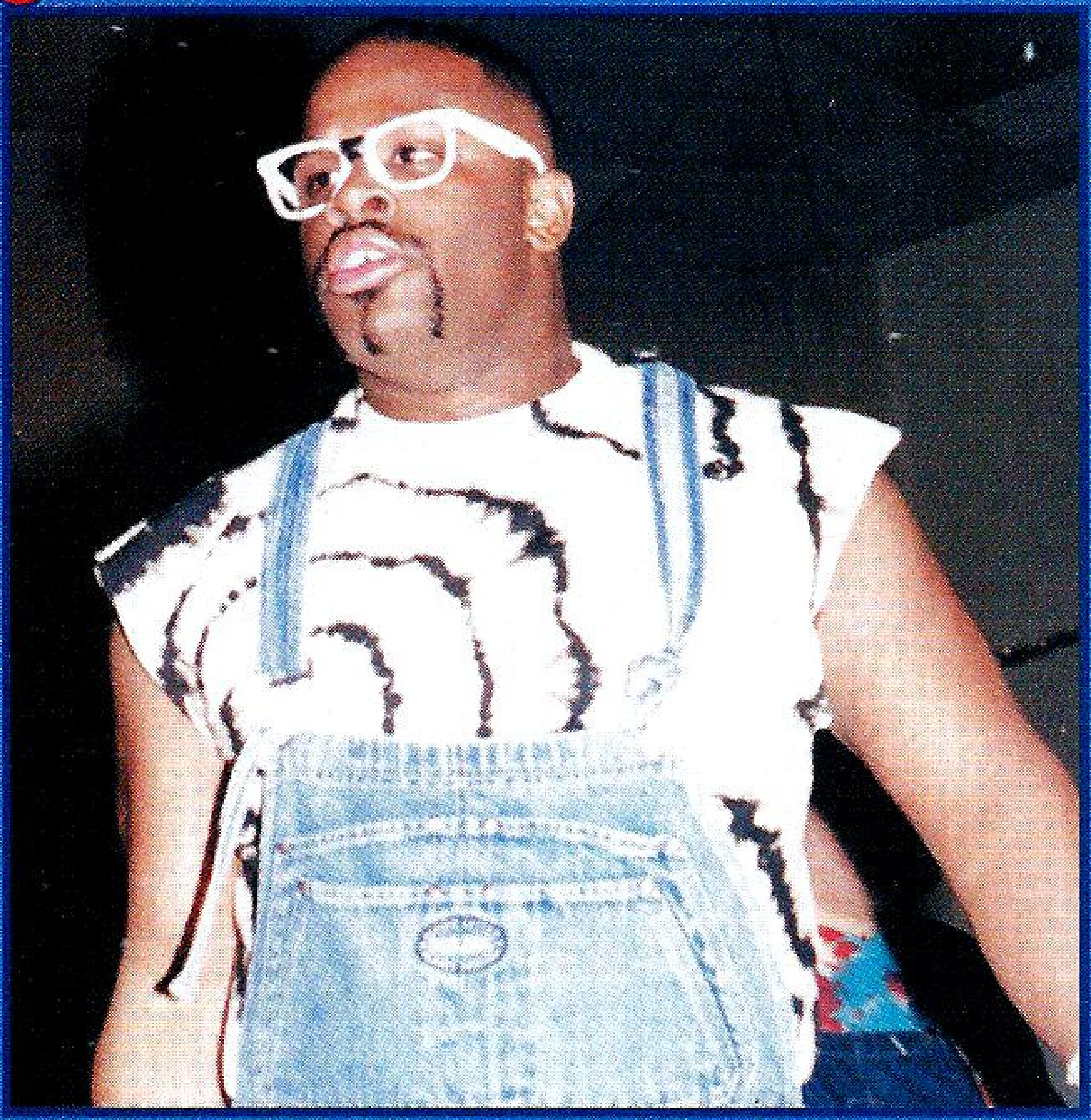
AUGUST 1, 1972:
Brother Devon is born as Devon Hughes in New Rochelle, New York.

MARCH 15, 1997:
The Dudley Boyz capture their first ECW tag team championship by defeating The Eliminators at ECW's Hostile City Showdown.

OCTOBER 24, 1998:
The Dudley Boyz become the sixth ECW tag team champions in 14 months, defeating Sabu and Rob Van Dam for their fourth run with the title.

JULY 14, 1971:
Brother Ray is born as Mark LoMonaco in Massapequa, New York.

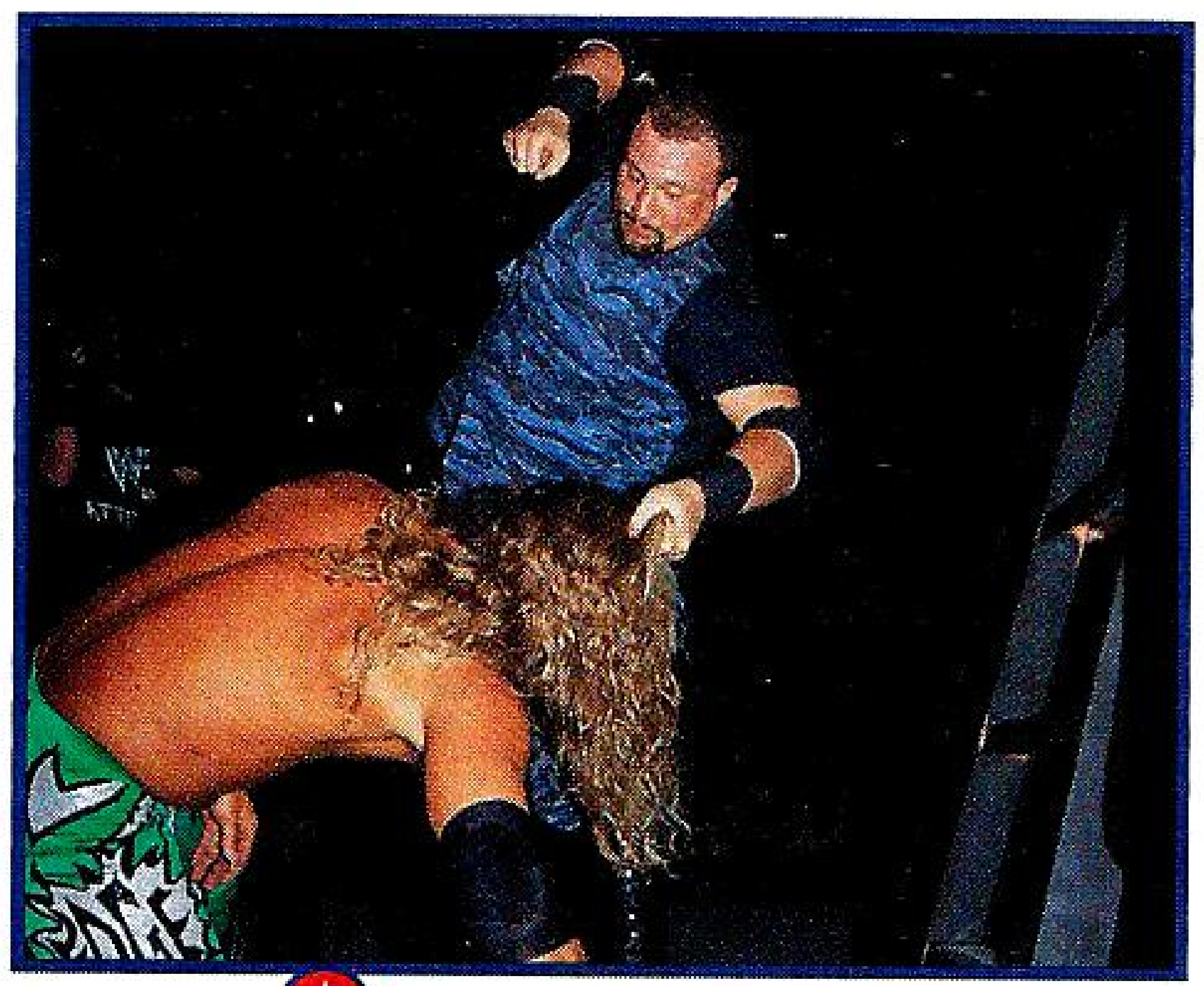
APRIL 13, 1996:
D-Von Dudley becomes the newest member of the Dudley family revealed to the fans of ECW. The most serious Dudley begins partnering with half-brother Buh Buh Ray.



AUGUST 17, 1997:
After trading the gold with both The Eliminators and The Gangstas, the Dudleys regain the strap for the third time.

Team 3D

***Inside Wrestling* journeys back in time to examine the career of a superstar who has left a major imprint on the sport**



AUGUST 26, 1999:
Less than a year after winning the gold for the fourth time, the Dudleys win their record eighth—and final—ECW tag team title on an episode of *ECW on TNN*.

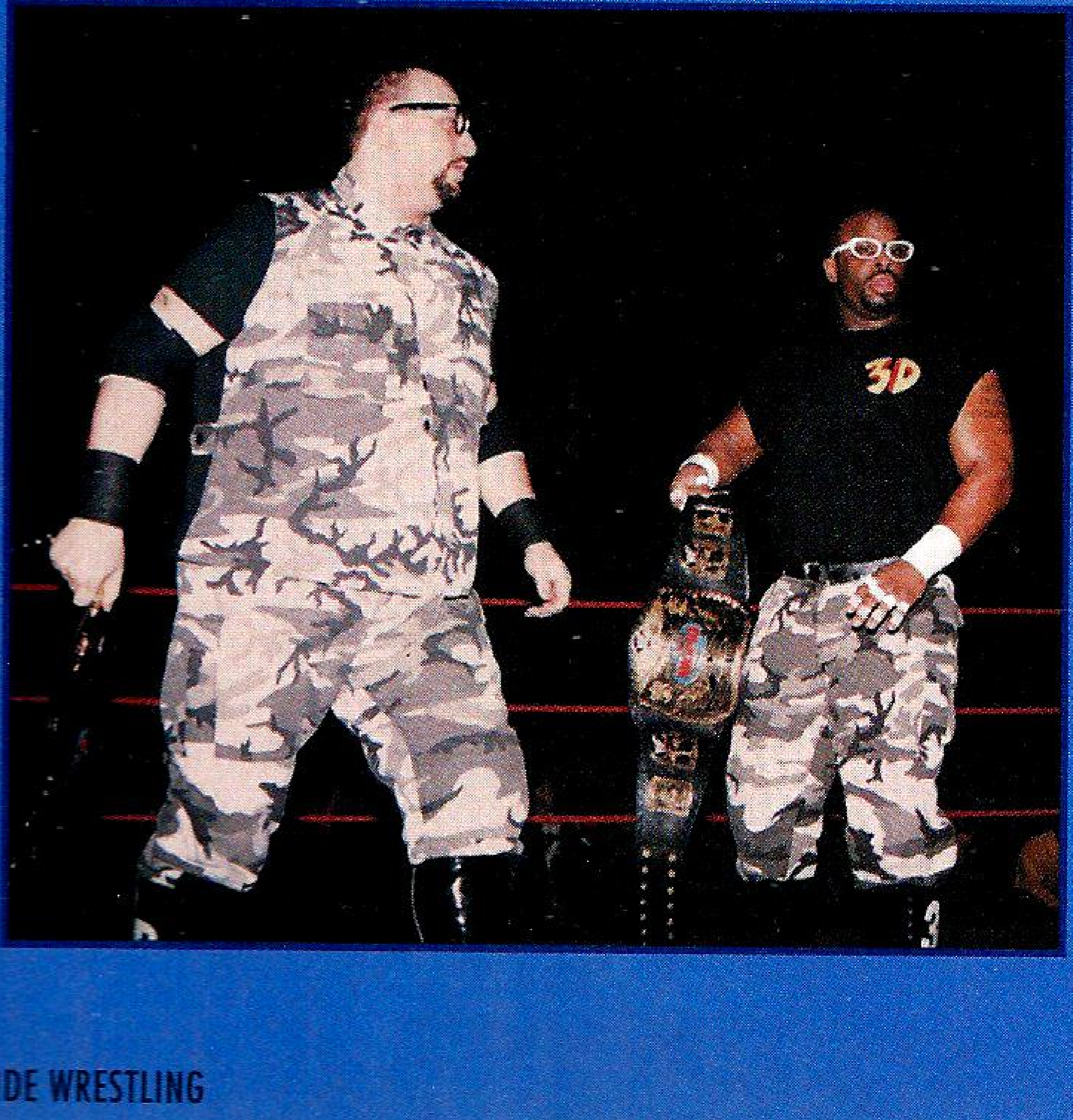
APRIL 2, 2000:
Competing at their first WrestleMania, the Dudleys and the Hardys fall to Edge and Christian in a "Triangle Ladder" match.

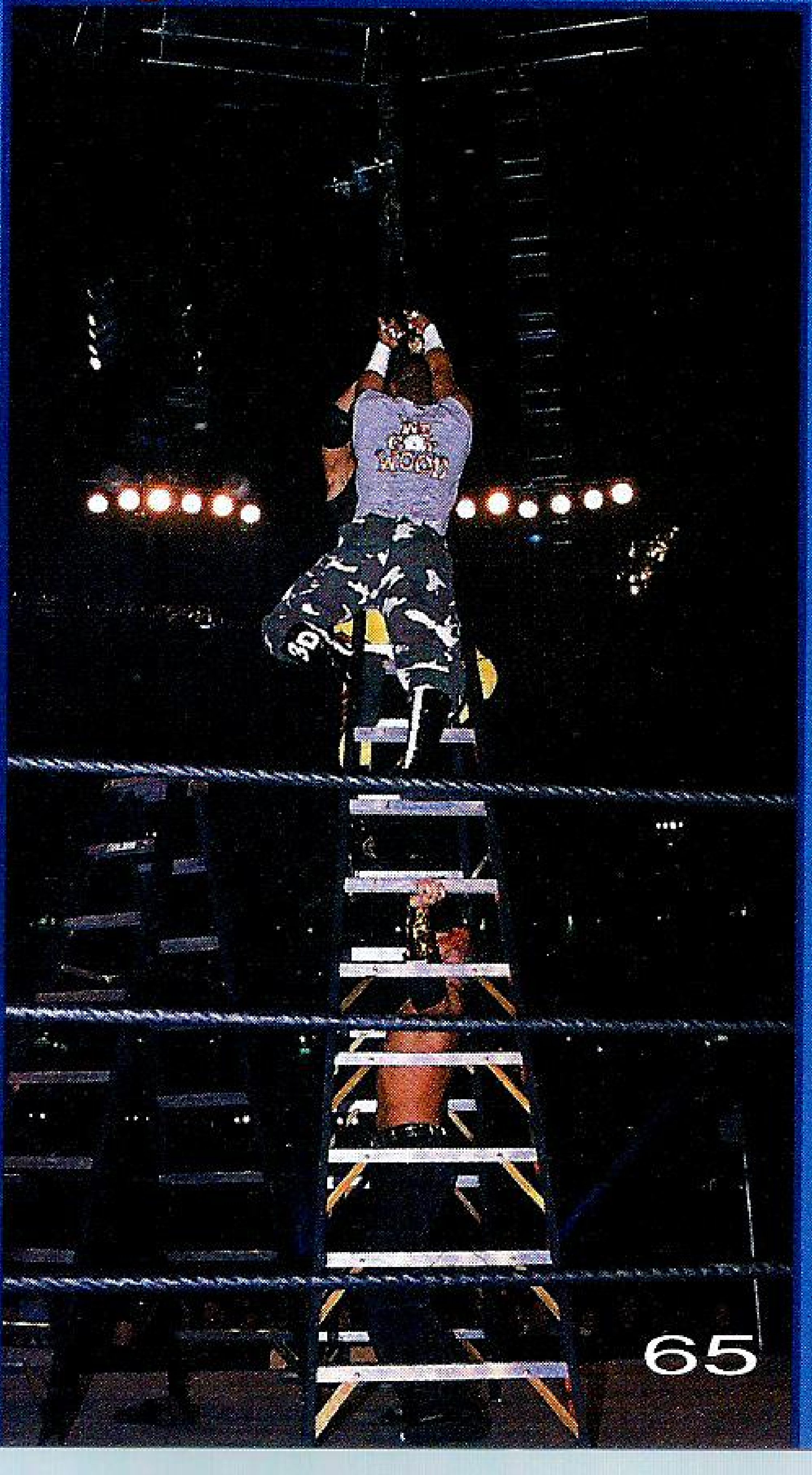
MARCH 19, 2001:
Another Dudley Brother—Spike—joins the fold and helps Bubba Ray (as he's now known) and D-Von win the WWF World tag team title on an episode of Raw.

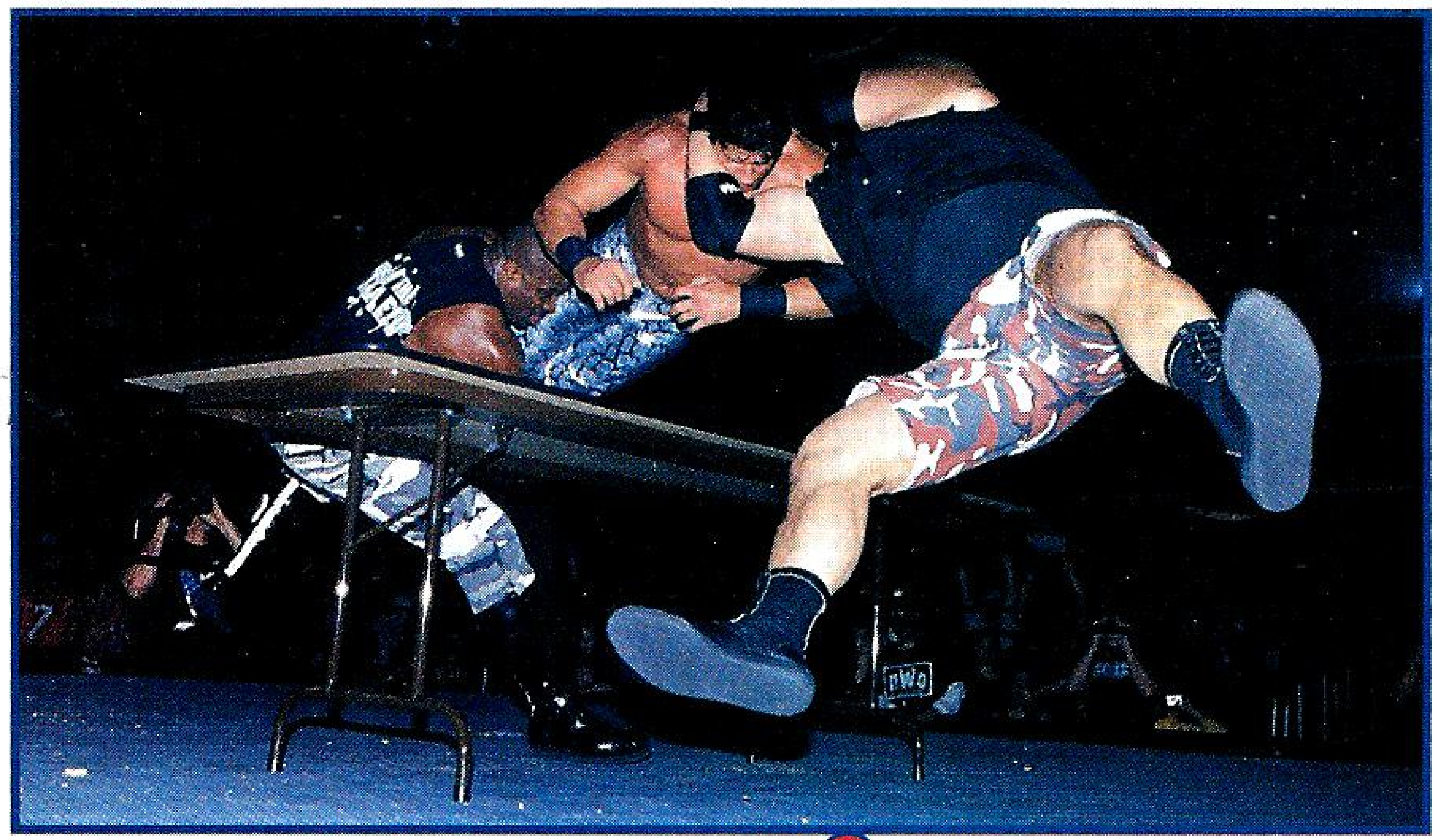
FEBRUARY 27, 2000:
After leaving ECW for the WWF, The Dudley Boyz win their first WWF World tag team championship at the company's No Way Out pay-per-view.

AUGUST 27, 2000:
Adding a few extra accessories to the mayhem, The Dudley Boyz compete in the first ever tables, ladders, and chairs match at SummerSlam 2000.

APRIL 1, 2001:
In an encore performance for the ages, Bubba Ray and D-Von participate in another "TLC" match, this time at WrestleMania X7.







MARCH 25, 2002:
The Dudley Boyz are split up in the first ever WWE brand extension draft. Bubba Ray stays with Raw while D-Von moves to Smackdown.

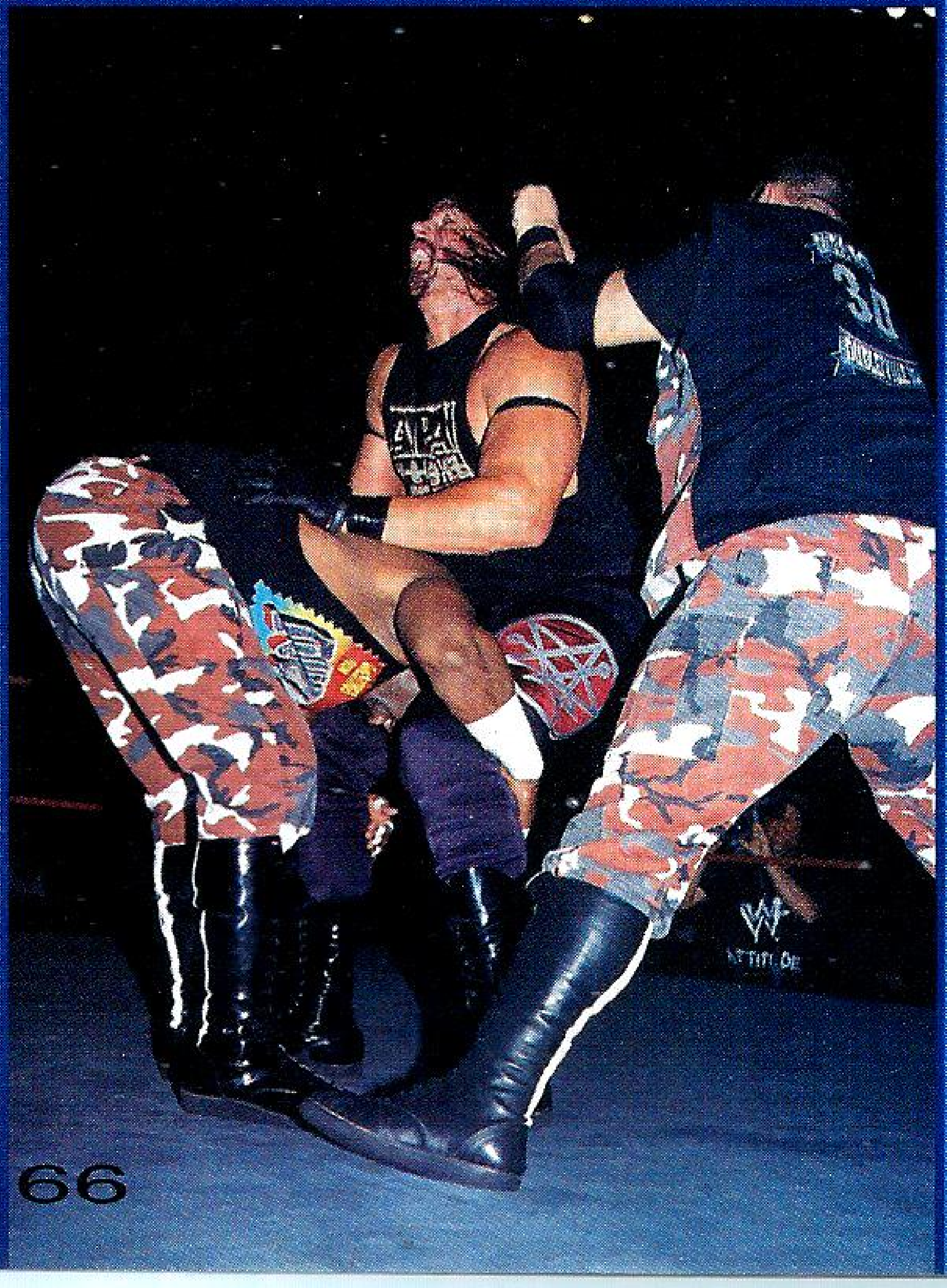
SEPTEMBER 30, 2002:
In an improbable Raw World title match, Bubba Ray falls to Triple-H on Raw.

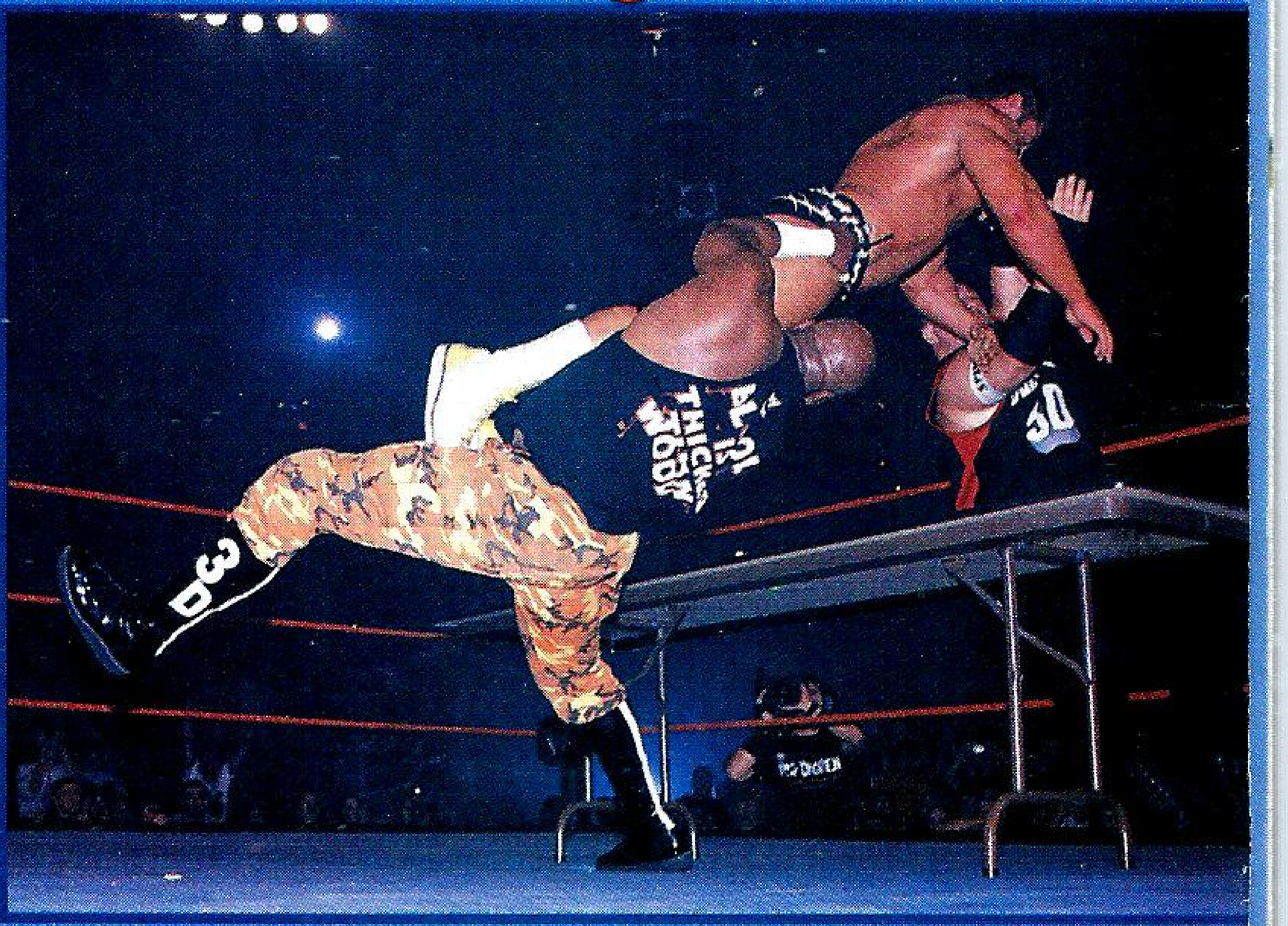
NOVEMBER 17, 2002:
The Dudley division ends when D-Von assists Bubba Ray in his match at Survivor Series.

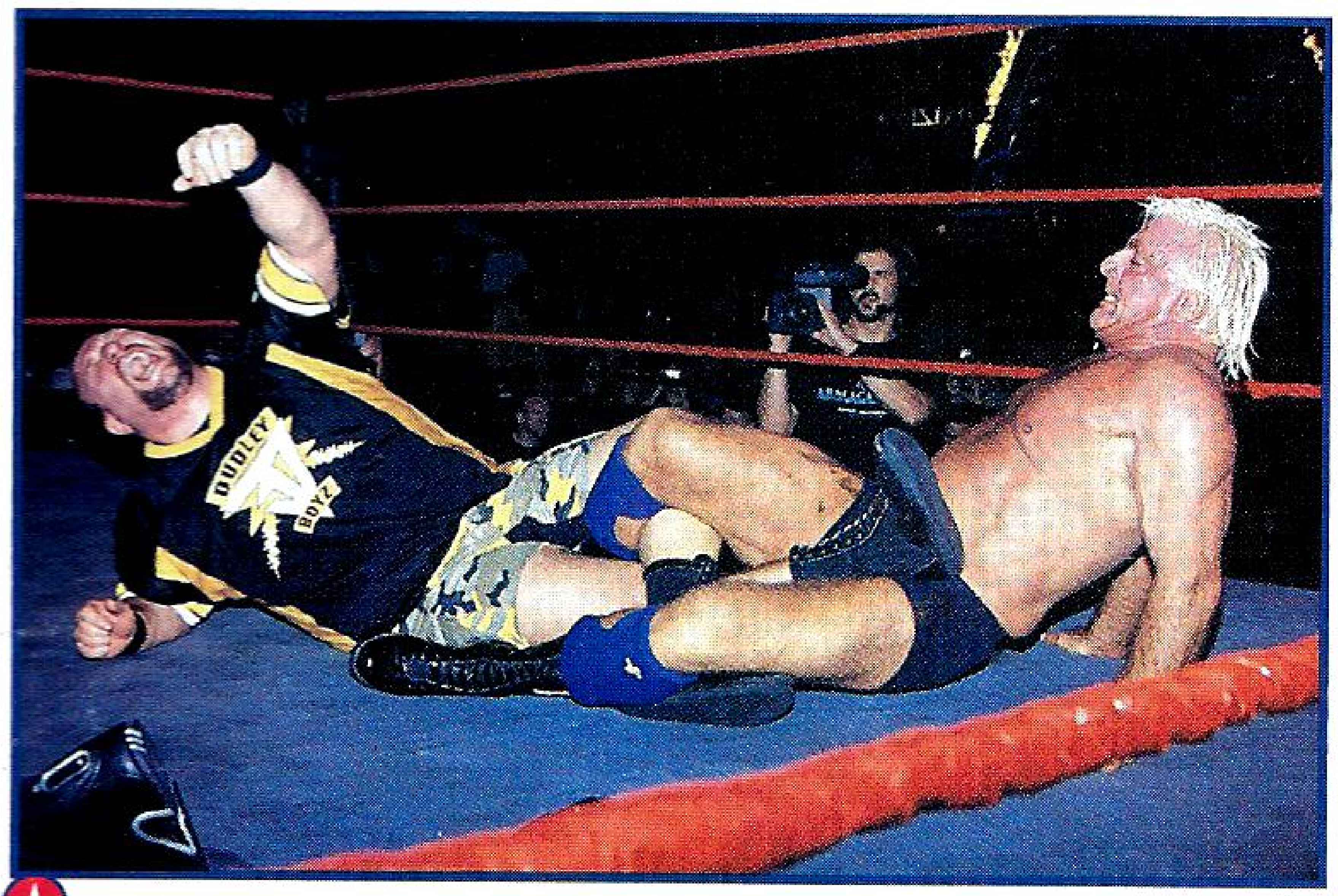
JULY 9, 2001:
On an episode of Raw, the Dudleys are recruited by former employer Paul Heyman to join the ECW/WCW invasion of WWF. They lose their tag team title to The Acolytes the same night.

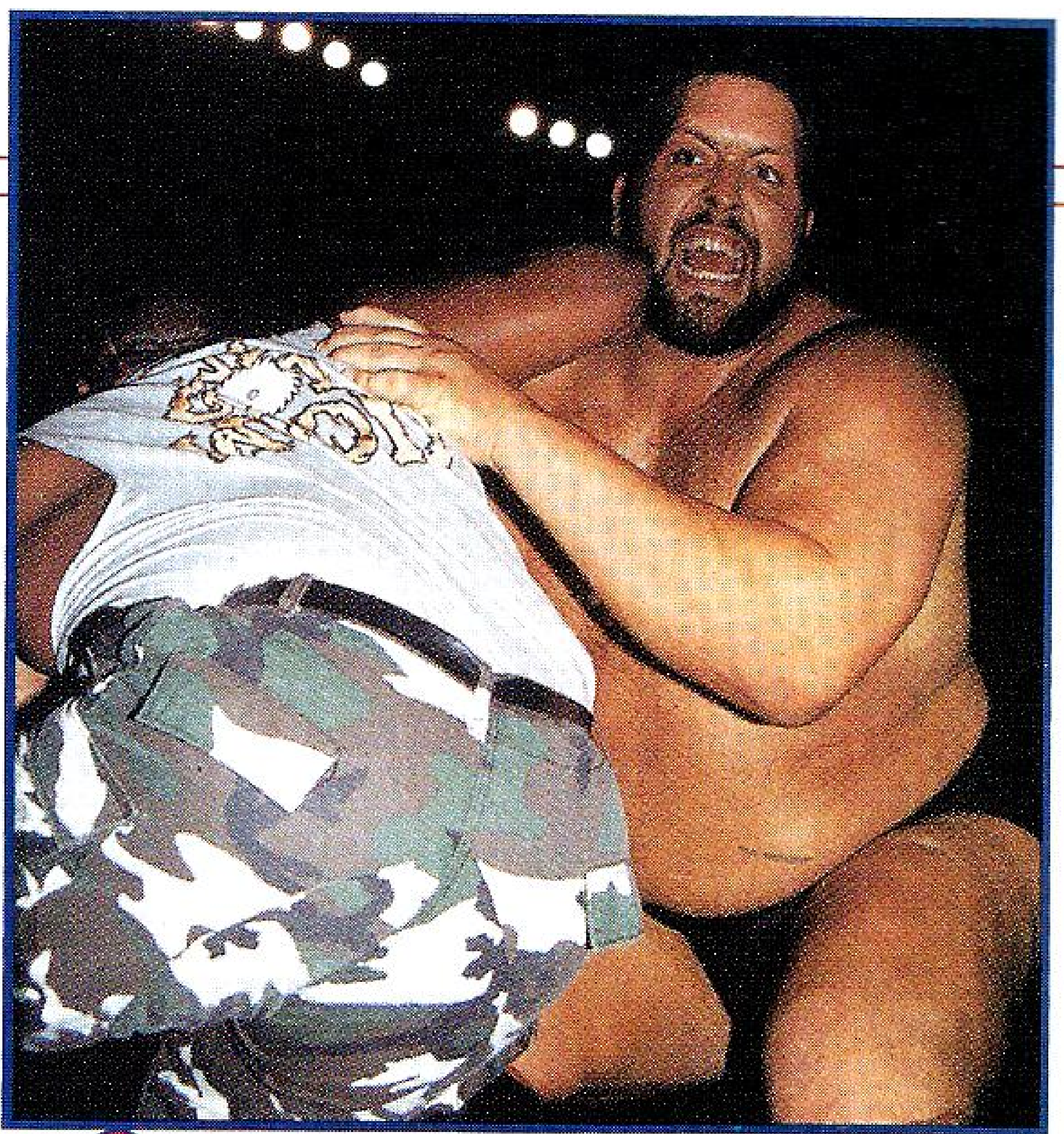
MAY 19, 2002:
D-Von, referred to as "Reverend" D-Von, and his massive associate Deacon Batista attack Bubba Ray and put him through a table at WWE's Judgment Day pay-per-view.

SEPTEMBER 21, 2003:
At WWE's Unforgiven pay-per-view the Dudleys beat La Resistance & Rob Conway in a handicap tables match to win the Raw World tag team title.









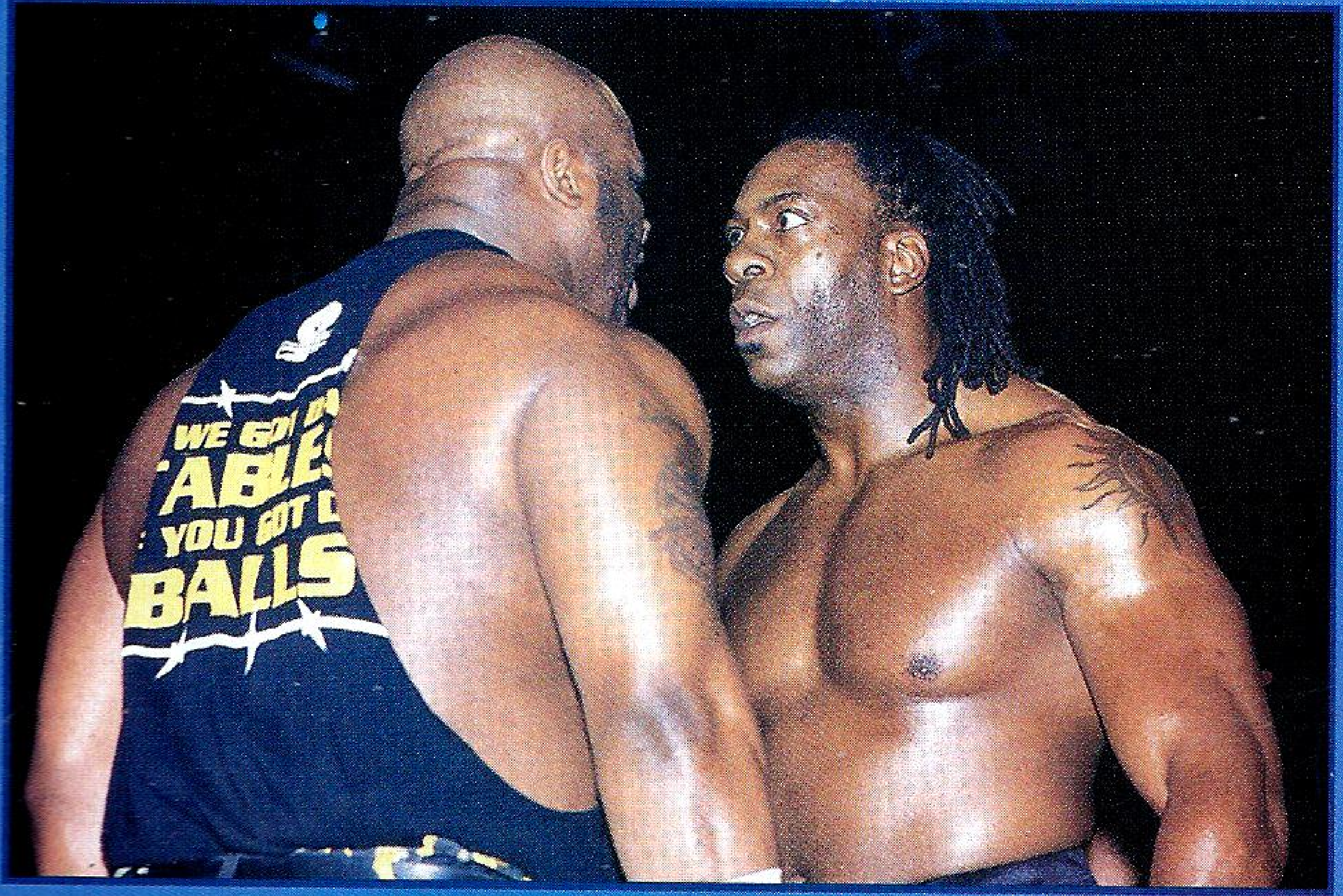
DECEMBER 14, 2003
At Armageddon, Bubba Ray and D-Von drop their title to Batista and Ric Flair.

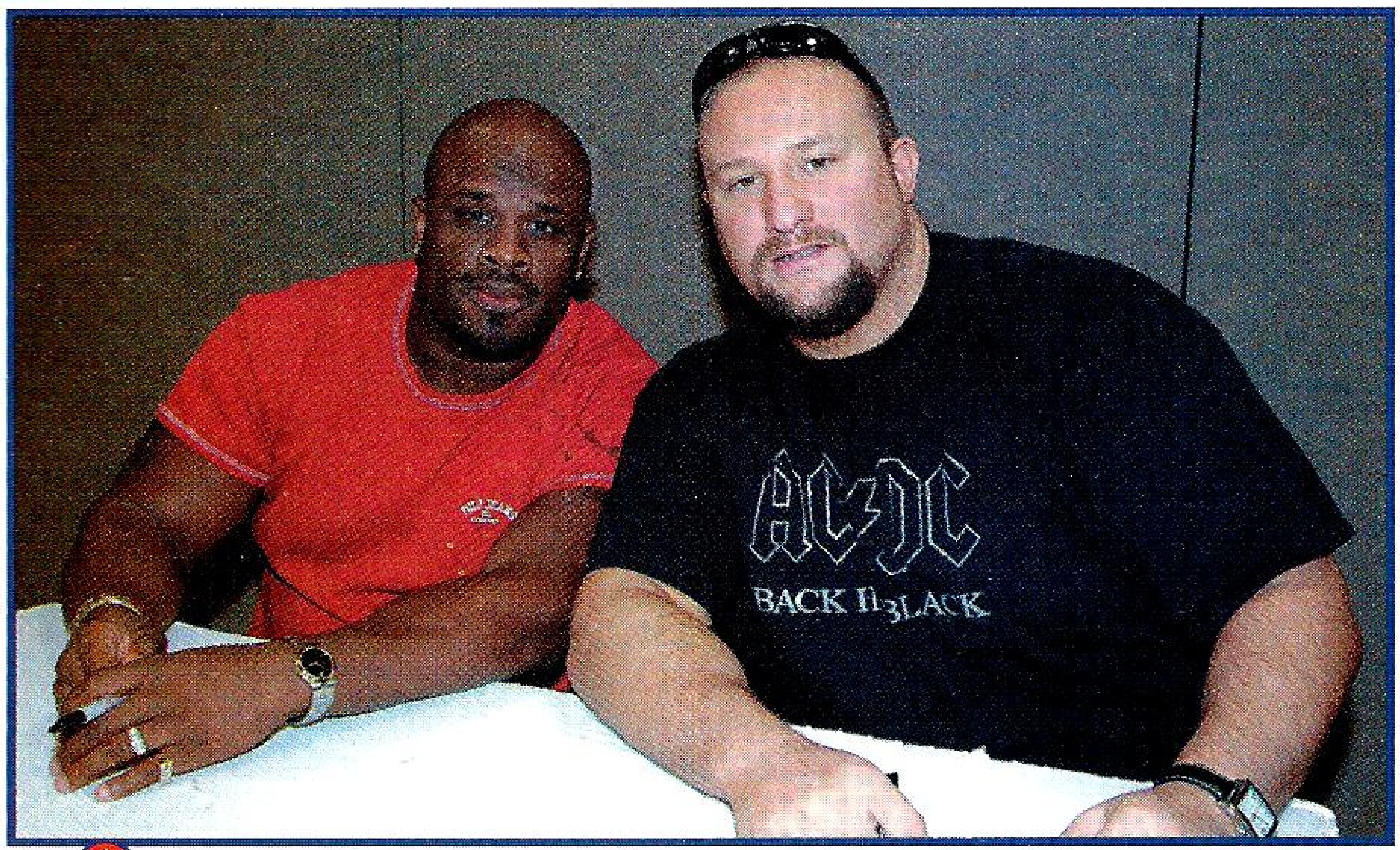
MARCH 14, 2004:
In their hometown of New York City, the Dudleys fall to Rob Van Dam and Booker T in a four-way tag match for the Raw World tag team title.

JUNE 27, 2004:
The Undertaker defeats the Dudleys in a "Live Free Or Die" match at the Great American Bash pay-per-view.

JULY 29, 2004:
Spike Dudley captures the cruiserweight title from Rey Mysterio Jr. after interference by his half-brothers on an episode of Smackdown.

NOVEMBER 4, 2004:
In an unsuccessful attempt to earn the favor of Kurt Angle, the Dudleys cannot subdue The Big Show on Smackdown and the pair is pummeled thoroughly for their efforts.





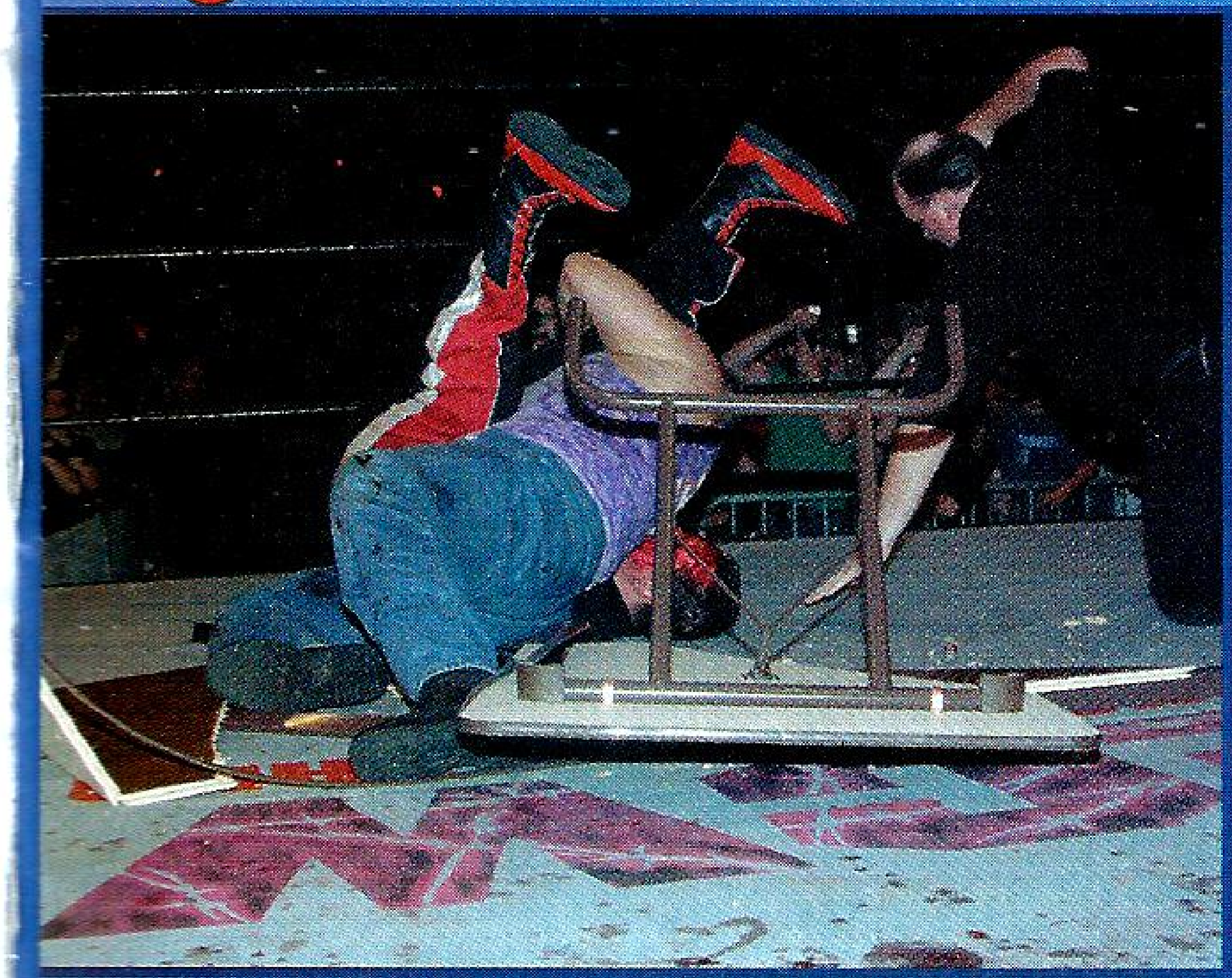
JULY 5, 2005:
The Dudleys are part of a sweeping round of releases by WWE on a day that comes to be known as "Black Tuesday."

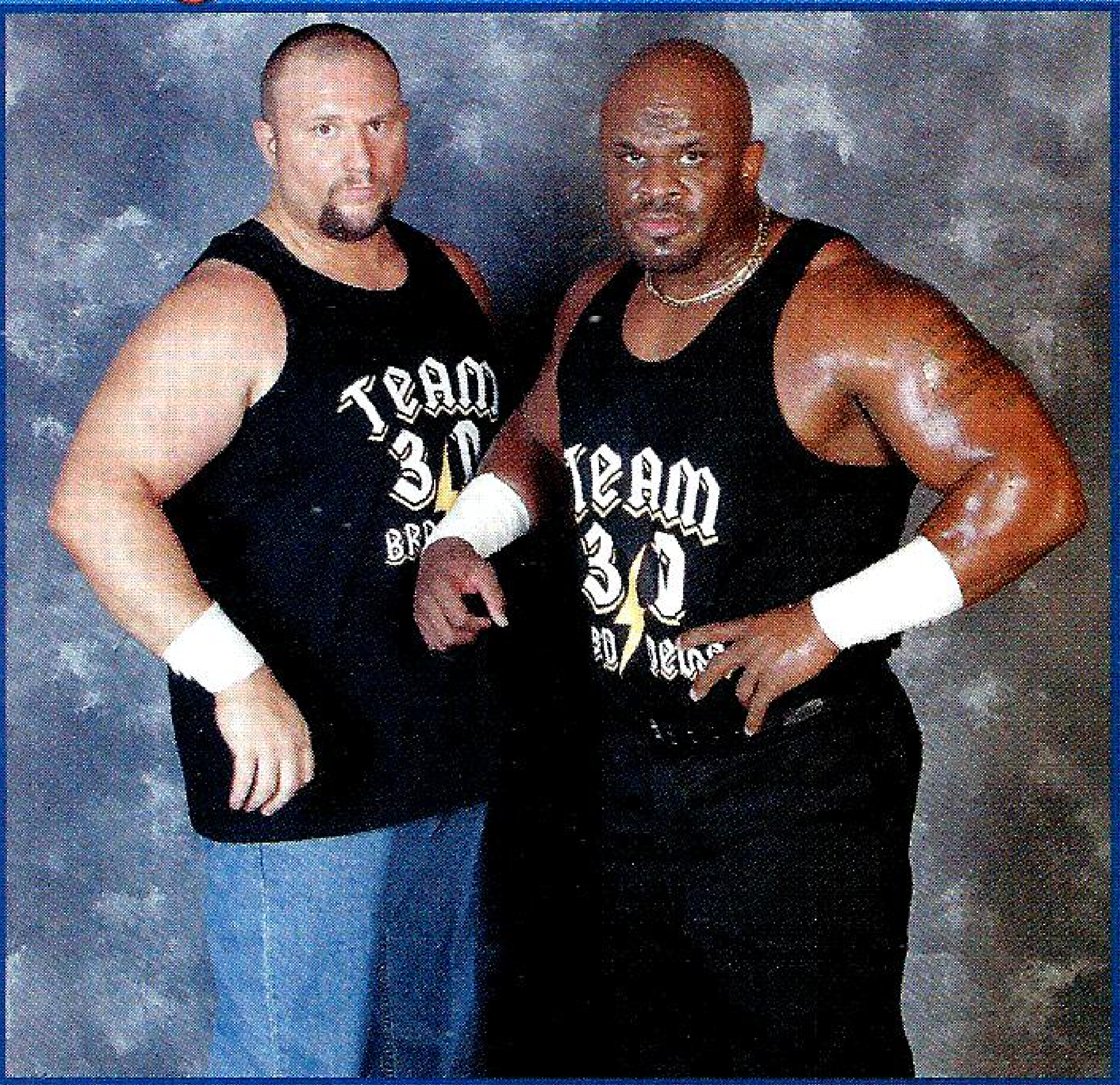
DECEMBER 11, 2005:
In a non-title bout, Team 3D brings the pain in defeating America's Most Wanted in an old-school tables match at Turning Point.

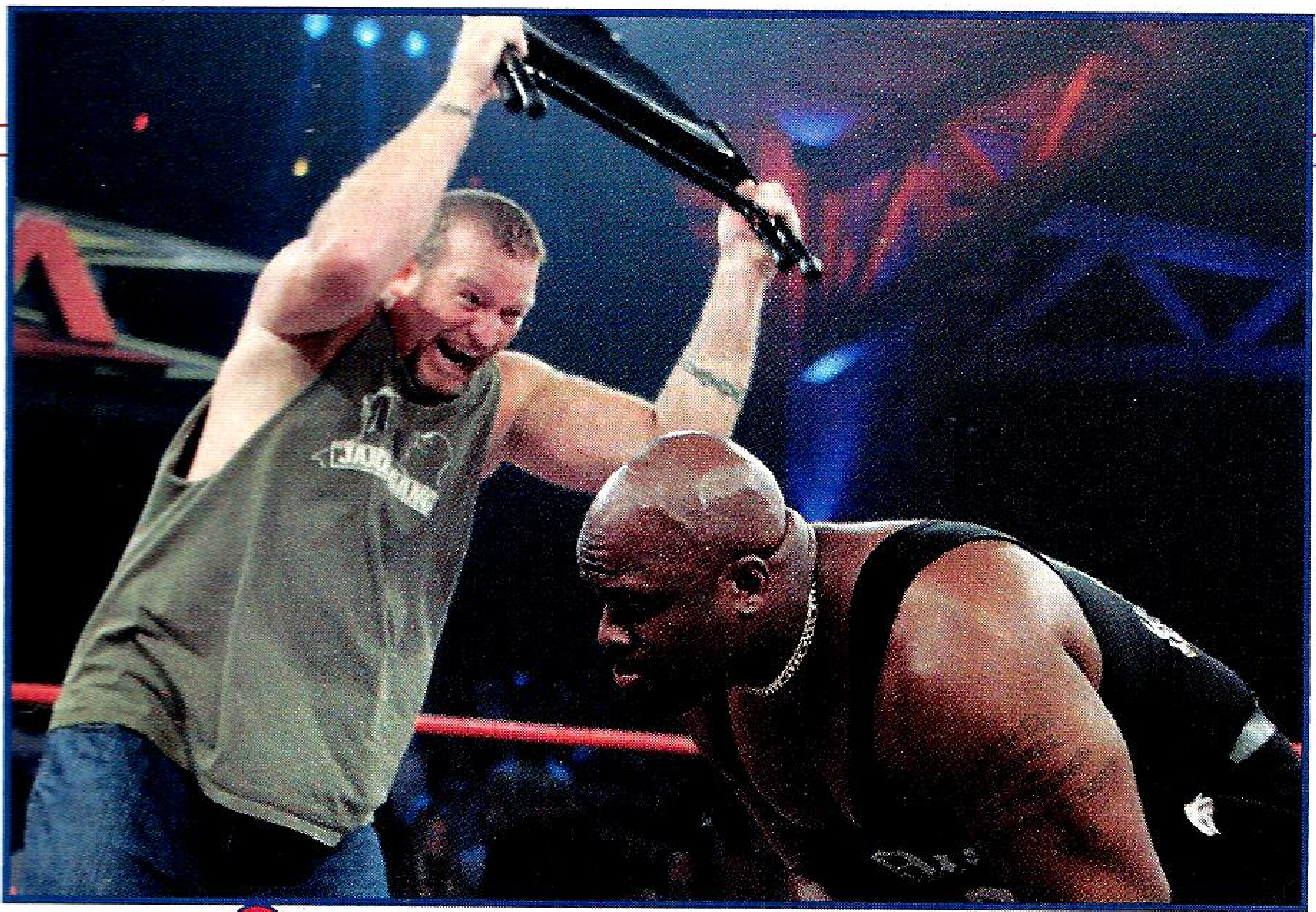
JUNE 12, 2005:
The Dudley Boyz are at their ECW best at One Night Stand, defeating Tommy Dreamer and Sandman in a brutal tag team match complete with flaming tables.

OCTOBER 1, 2005:
Sporting the moniker Team 3D, Brother Ray and Brother Devon make their TNA debut during an episode of *Impact*.

NOVEMBER 13, 2005:
Team 3D partners with fellow ECW alum Rhino to defeat Jeff Jarrett and America's Most Wanted at TNA's Genesis pay-per-view.



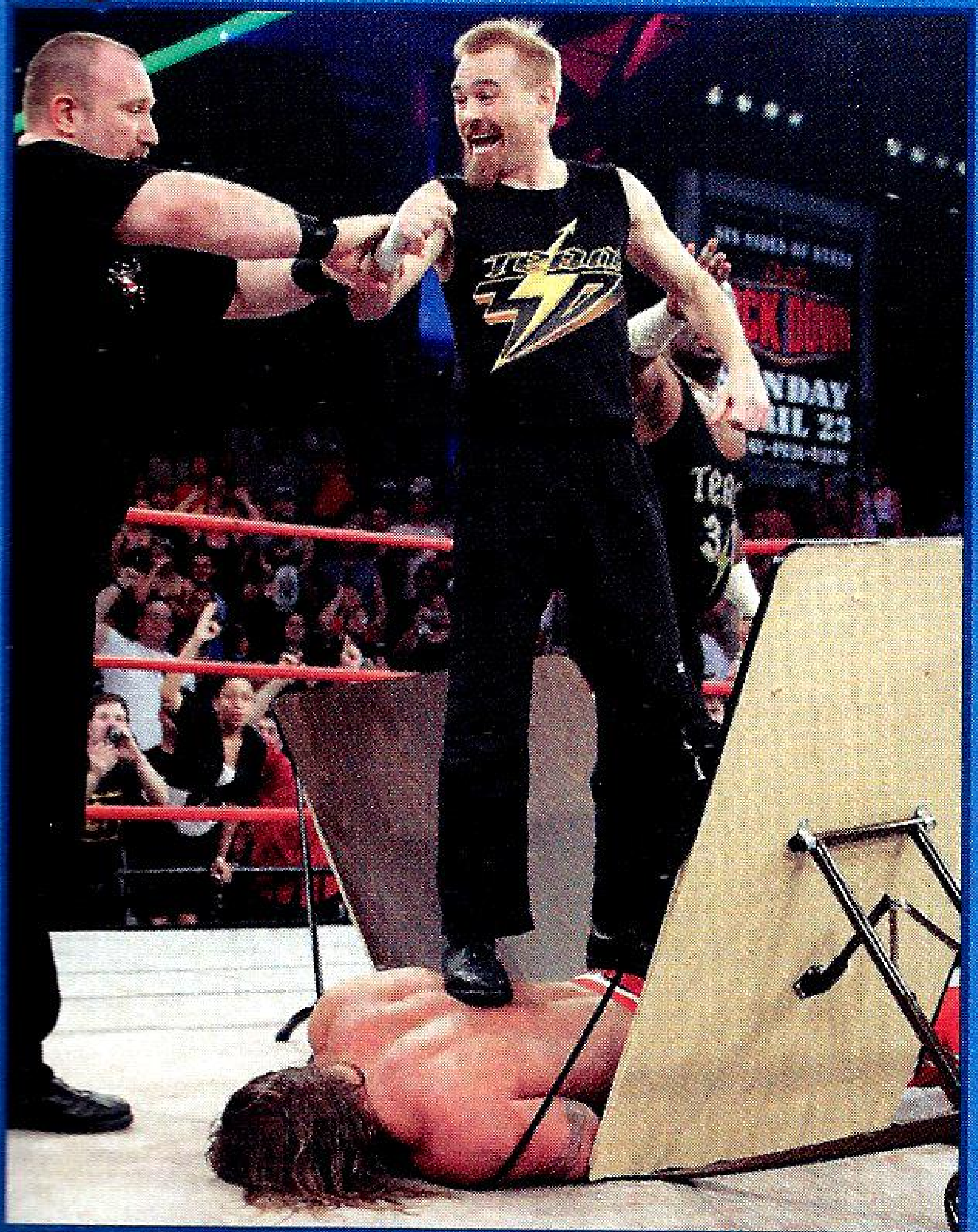




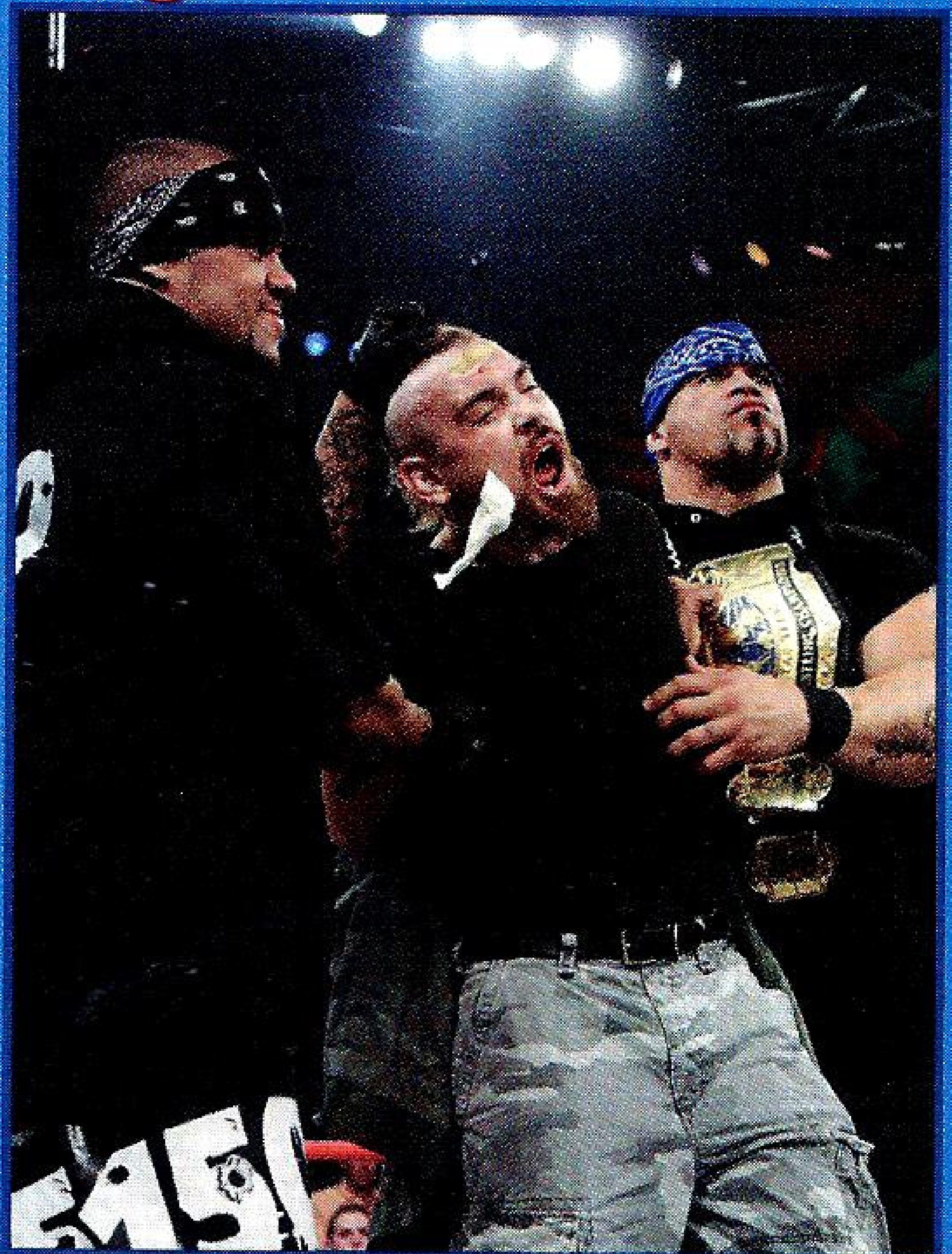
MAY 14, 2006:
Two of the greatest tag teams of the past 20 years—Team 3D and The James Gang (formerly New Age Outlaws)—square off at TNA's Sacrifice pay-per-view, with B.G. and Kip emerging victorious.

OCTOBER 22, 2006:
After making their title aspirations known, Team 3D wins a four-way tag contest over America's Most Wanted, The Naturals, and The James Gang at Bound for Glory.

APRIL 13, 2006:
Former Dudley brother Spike debuts in TNA as Brother Runt to save Ray and Devon from an attack by Team Canada.



JANUARY 11, 2007:
Gunning for the NWA World tag team title, Team 3D begins an intense feud with LAX by attacking their then-leader Konnan on an episode of *Impact.* Lax retaliates by attacking Brother Runt.



FEBRUARY 12, 2007:
In a "Little Italy" streetfight, Team 3D falls to LAX at TNA's Against All Odds pay-per-view.

JULY 15, 2007:
Team 3D loses the TNA World tag team title to Samoa Joe and Kurt Angle at TNA's Victory Road pay-per-view in a "Champions vs. Champions" match.

APRIL 15, 2007:
At Lockdown, in an "Electrified Six Sides Of Steel" match, Team 3D finally captures the NWA World tag team title by defeating LAX. The championship would be changed to the TNA World tag team title in May.

OCTOBER 14, 2007:
Facing another legendary duo, The Steiner Brothers, Team 3D loses at TNA's Bound For Glory in a two-out-of-three-falls tables match.

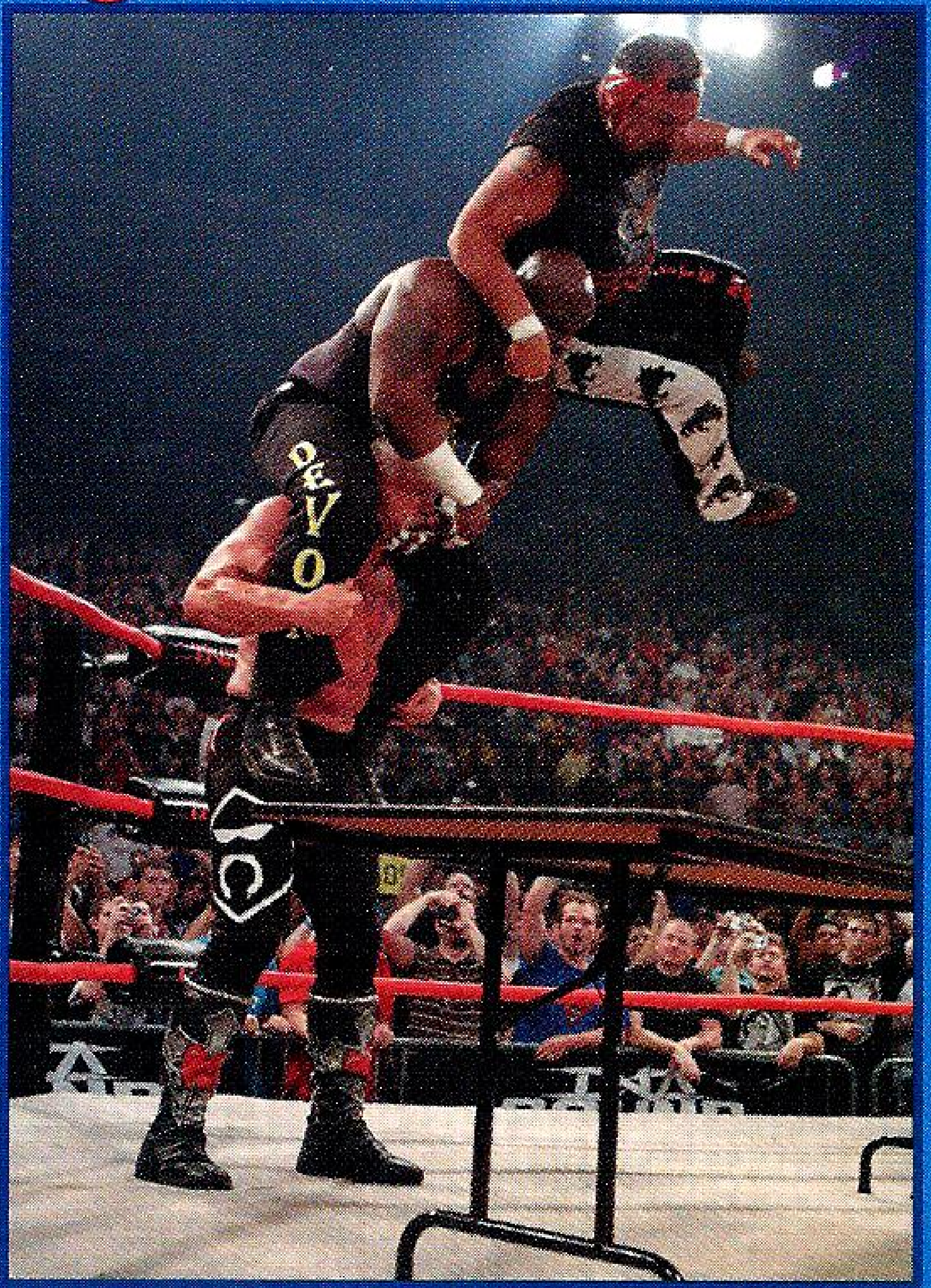
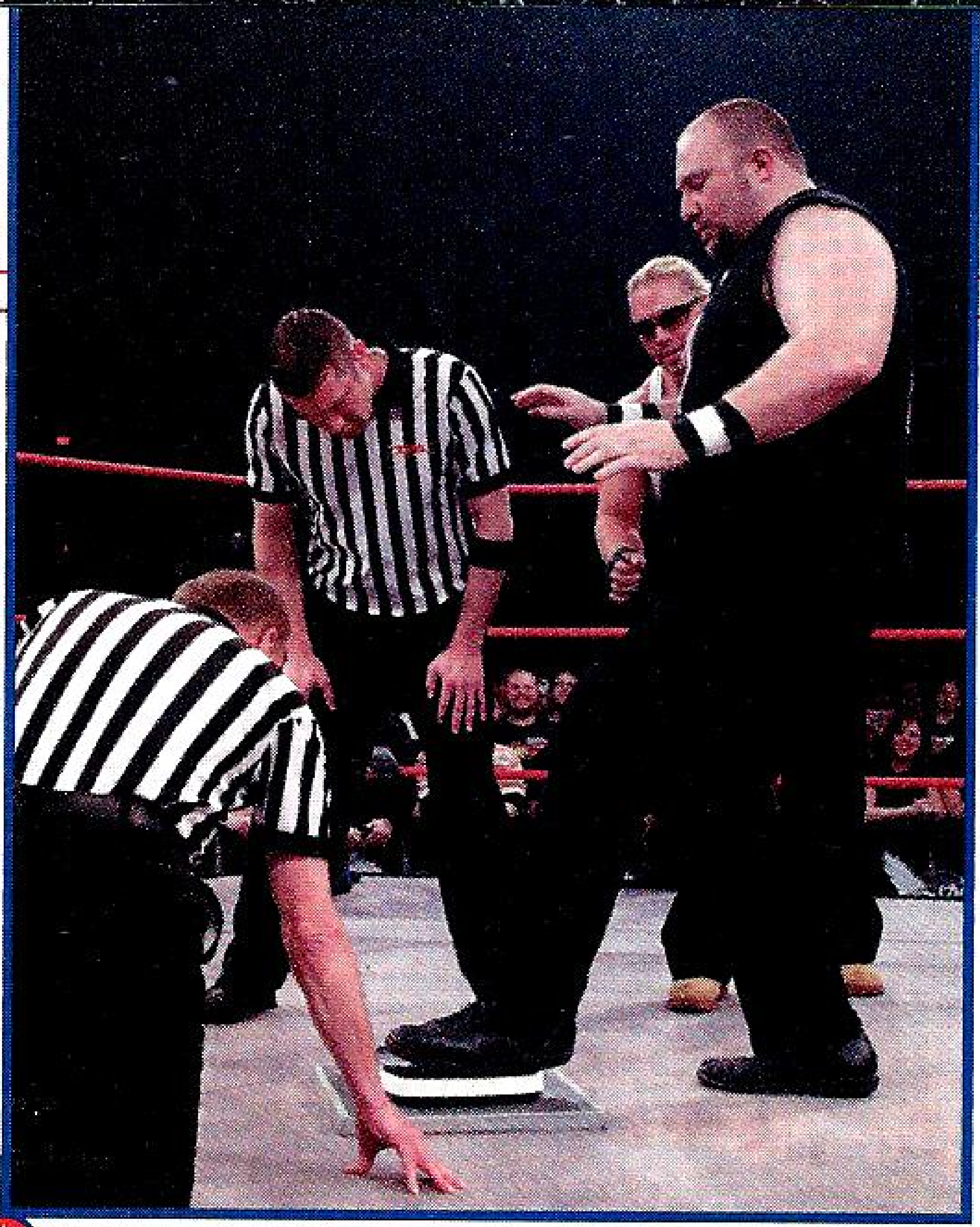


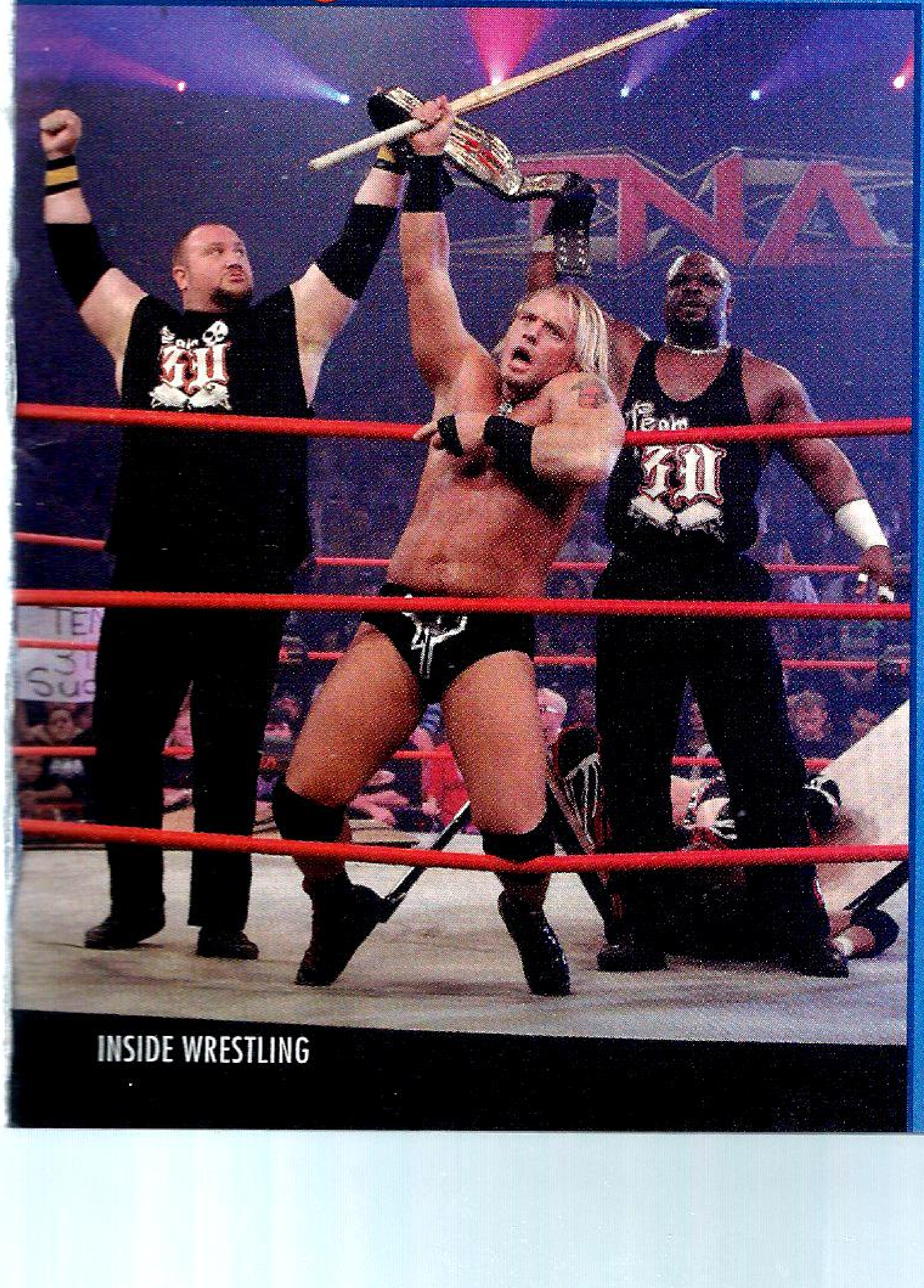
Photo by George Tahinos

NOVEMBER 11, 2007:
Focusing their attention on The Motor City Machine Guns, Team 3D falls at Genesis and fails to gain revenge on the team they credited with costing them their feud with The Steiners.



FEBRUARY 10, 2008:
Due to their loss in a six-man tag match at Against All Odds, Team 3D is required to each weigh under 275 pounds to compete in TNA. Later, it would be further stipulated that the duo would be fired if they failed to make weight.

JANUARY 24, 2008:
Brother Ray assists honorary Team 3D member Johnny Devine in winning the X division title on *Impact*.



MARCH 9, 2008:
Curry Man and Shark Boy beat Team 3D in the aptly titled "Fish Market" streetfight at TNA's Destination X pay-per-view. All fish are harmed during the filming of the match.

ROLL CALL OF CHAMPIONS

For period ended April 21, 2008

Championships highlighted in bold on the "Roll Call Of Champions" have changed hands since our previous issue. The information under the championship listing indicates the date that champion won the title, who the former champion was, and where the match took place.

ALL JAPAN INTERNATIONAL TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: JOE DOERING & KEIJI MUTO
(January 3, 2008; from Satoshi Kojima & TARU; Tokyo, Japan)

ALL JAPAN JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: SILVER KING
(March 1, 2008; from Katsuhiko Nakajima; Tokyo, Japan)

ALL JAPAN TRIPLE CROWN CHAMPION: KENSUKE SASAKI
(August 26, 2007; from Minoru Suzuki; Tokyo, Japan)

AMERICAN WRESTLING ASSOCIATION HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: BRIAN LOGAN
(April 18, 2008; from Larry Zbyszko, Fayetteville, WV)

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: GLEN OSBOURNE
(April 5, 2008; from Mr. Scott Wright; Newark, DE)

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION MID-ATLANTIC CHAMPION: ACE DARLING
(April 5, 2008; defeated J.J. Cruz; Newark, DE)

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: BRYAN & MATT LOGAN
(December 1, 2007; from Max Von Bauer & Kermon the German; Newark, DE)

ECW HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: KANE
(March 29, 2008; from Chavo Guerrero Jr.; Orlando, FL)

FCW FLORIDA HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: JAKE HAGER
(March 22, 2008; defeated Southern heavyweight champion Heath Miller to unify and disband the Southern heavyweight title; New Port Richey, FL)

FCW FLORIDA TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: EDDIE COLON & ERIC PEREZ
(April 15, 2008; from Nic Nemeth & Brad Allen by DQ; New Port Richey, FL)

FULL IMPACT PRO HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: RODERICK STRONG
(February 16, 2008; from Erick Stevens; Crystal River, FL)

FULL IMPACT PRO TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: JASON BLADE & KENNY KING
(November 9, 2007; from Jay & Mark Briscoe; Crystal River, FL)

FULL IMPACT PRO FLORIDA HERITAGE CHAMPION: SAL RINAURO
(November 9, 2007; from Erick Stevens; Crystal River, FL)

IWA MID-SOUTH HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: EDDIE KINGSTON
(December 7, 2007; from Mike Quackenbush in a four-way match also involving Chris Hero and Chuck Taylor; Plainfield, IL)

IWF HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: TRAVIS BLAKE
(February 17, 2008; from Tony Torres; West Paterson, NJ)

IWGP HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: SHINSUKE NAKAMURA
(January 4, 2008; from Hiroshi Tanahashi; Tokyo, Japan)

IWGP INTERNATIONAL TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: TOGI MAKABE & TORU YANO
(February 17, 2008; from Giant Bernard & Travis Tomko; Tokyo, Japan)

IWGP JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: WATARU INOUE
(December 8, 2007; from Ryusuke Taguchi; Osaka, Japan)

OVW HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: NICK DINSMORE
(February 20, 2008; from Jay Bradley; Louisville, KY)

OVW SOUTHERN TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: RAMÓN & RAÚL
(February 27, 2008; from Paul Birchall & Stu Sanders; Louisville, KY)

OVW TV CHAMPION: TOMMY McNALER
(April 16, 2008; from Joey Matthews; Louisville, KY)

OVW WOMEN'S CHAMPION: JOSIE
(February 27, 2008; from Katie Lea; Louisville, KY)

PRO WRESTLING GUERRILLA CHAMPION: HUMAN TORNADO
(February 24, 2008; defeated Karl Anderson and Roderick Strong in three-way tournament final; Reseda, CA)

PRO WRESTLING GUERRILLA TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: EL GENERICO & KEVIN STEEN
(March 21, 2008; from Scott Lost & Joey Ryan; Reseda, CA)

PRO WRESTLING NOAH GLOBAL HONORED CROWN CHAMPION: TAKESHI MORISHIMA
(March 2, 2008; from Mitsuharu Misawa; Tokyo, Japan)

PRO WRESTLING NOAH GLOBAL HONORED CROWN JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: YOSHINOBU KANEMARU
(October 27, 2007; from Mushiking Terry; Tokyo, Japan)

PRO WRESTLING NOAH GLOBAL HONORED CROWN TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: NAOMICHI MARAFUJI & TAKASHI SUGIURA
(October 27, 2007; from D-Lo Brown & Buchanan; Tokyo, Japan)

RING OF HONOR CHAMPION: NIGEL McGUINNESS
(October 6, 2007; from Takeshi Morishima; Edison, NJ)

RING OF HONOR TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: JAY & MARK BRISCOE
(April 12, 2008; from Rocky Romero & Davey Richards; Edison, NJ)

SHIMMER CHAMPION: SARA DEL REY
(June 2, 2007; from Lacey in a tournament final; Berwyn, IL)

TNA WOMEN'S CHAMPION: AWESOME KONG
(January 7, 2008; from Gail Kim; Orlando, FL)

TNA WORLD CHAMPION: SAMOA JOE
(April 13, 2008; from Kurt Angle; Lowell, MA)

TNA WORLD TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: VACANT
(April 13, Lowell, MA; last held by A.J. Styles & Travis Tomko)

TNA X CHAMPION: PETEY WILLIAMS
(April 15, 2008; from Jay Lethal; Orlando, FL)

WWE INTERCONTINENTAL CHAMPION: CHRIS JERICHO
(March 10, 2008; from Jeff Hardy; Milwaukee, WI)

WWE RAW WORLD CHAMPION: RANDY ORTON
(October 7, 2007; from Triple-H; Rosemont, IL)

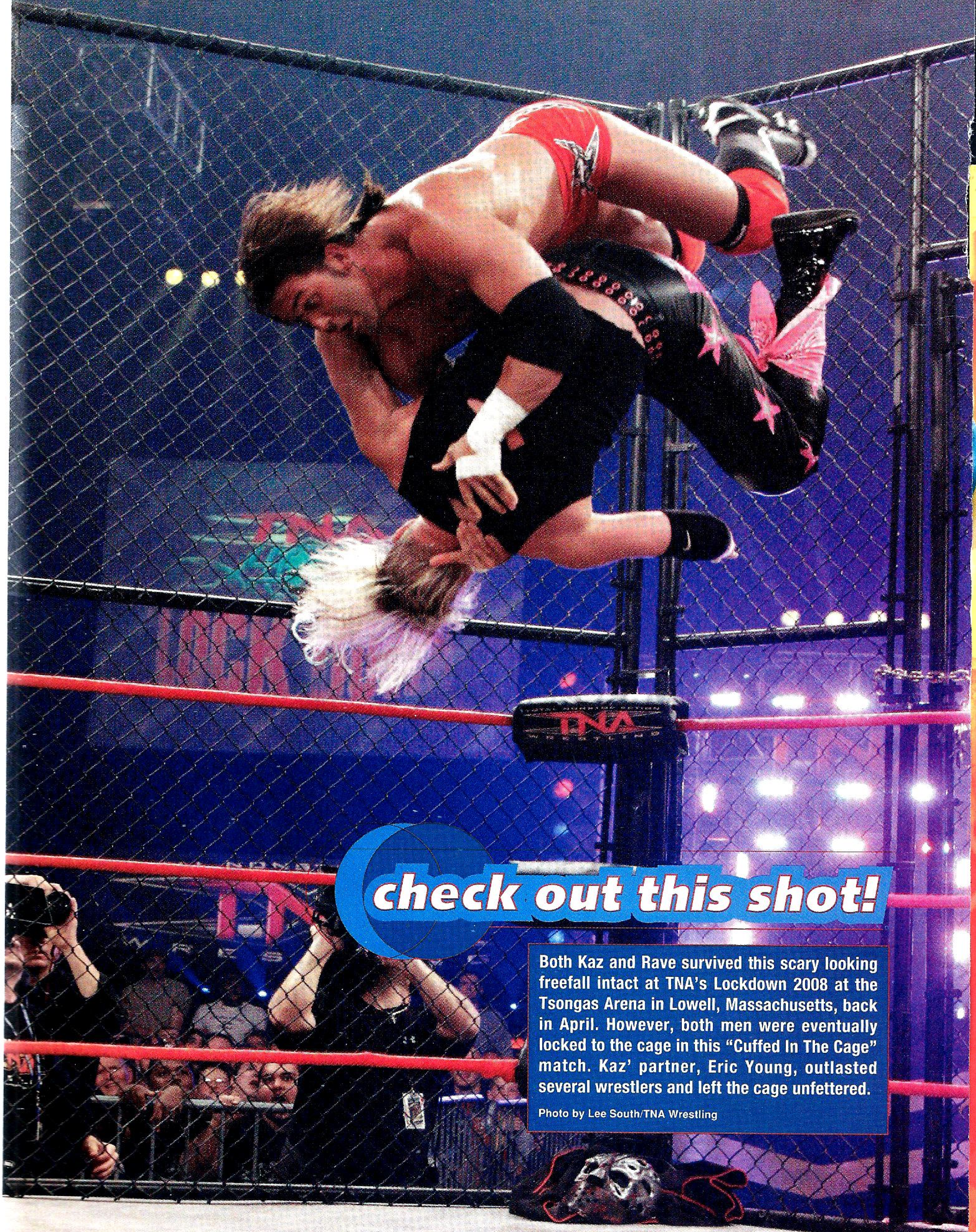
WWE RAW WORLD TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: HARDCORE HOLLY & CODY RHODES
(December 10, 2007; from Lance Cade & Trevor Murdoch; Bridgeport, CT)

WWE SMACKDOWN WORLD CHAMPION: THE UNDERTAKER
(March 30, 2008; from Edge; Orlando, FL)

WWE SMACKDOWN WORLD TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: JOHN MORRISON & THE MIZ
(November 13, 2007; from Matt Hardy & Montel Vontavious Porter; Wichita, KS)

WWE U.S. CHAMPION: MONTEL VONTAVIOUS PORTER
(May 20, 2007; from Chris Benoit; St. Louis, MO)

WWE WOMEN'S CHAMPION: MICKIE JAMES
(April 14, 2008; from Beth Phoenix; London, England)



check out this shot!

Both Kaz and Rave survived this scary looking freefall intact at TNA's Lockdown 2008 at the Tsongas Arena in Lowell, Massachusetts, back in April. However, both men were eventually locked to the cage in this "Cuffed In The Cage" match. Kaz' partner, Eric Young, outlasted several wrestlers and left the cage unfettered.

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

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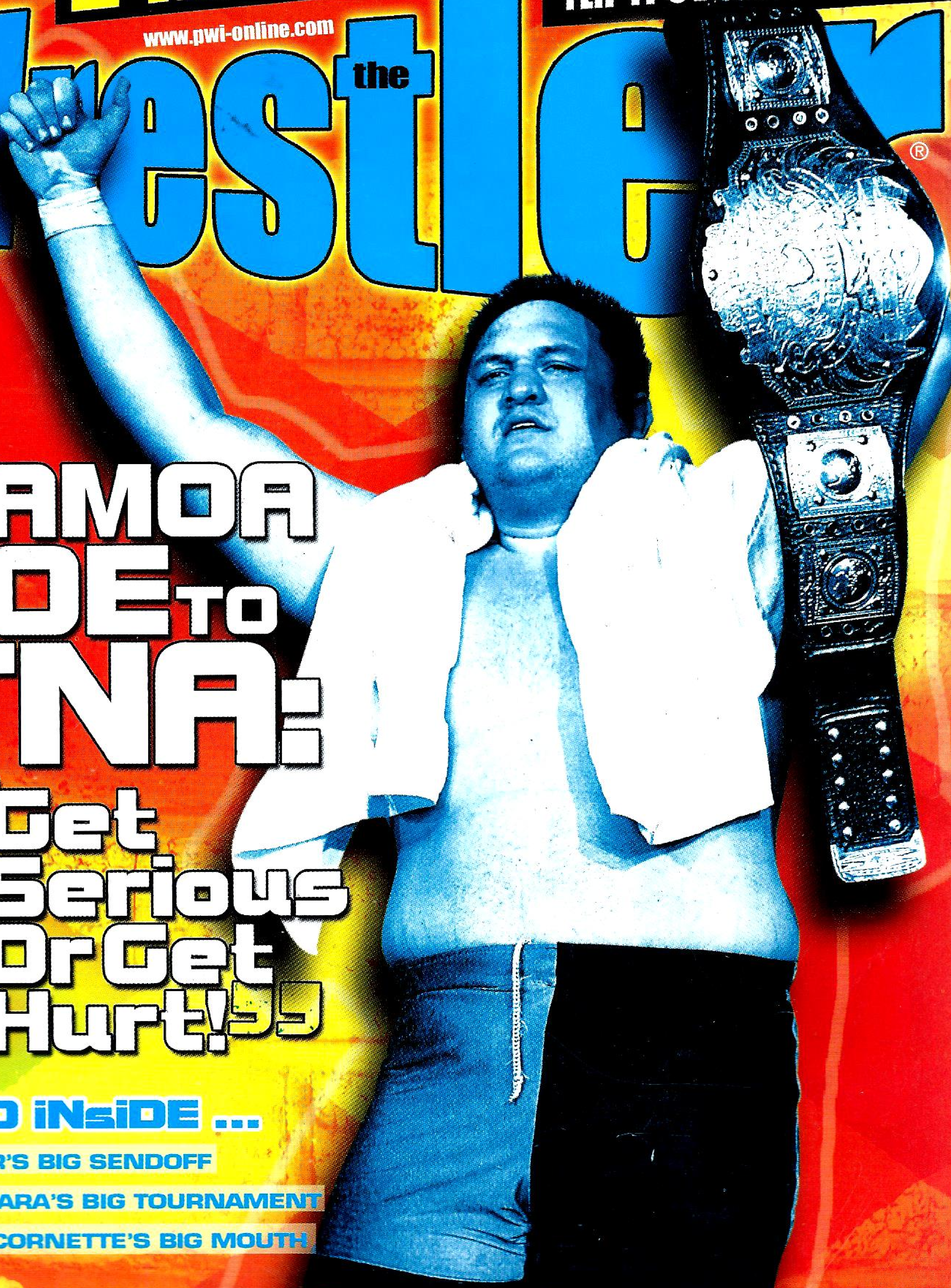


SAMOA JOE TO TNA: "Get Serious Or Get Hurt!"

AlsO iNsiDE ...

- FLAIR'S BIG SENDOFF
- CHIKARA'S BIG TOURNAMENT
- JIM CORNETTE'S BIG MOUTH

CONTENTS

VOLUME 22, 2008

COVER PHOTO:
LEE SOUTH/TNA WRESTLING

COVER DESIGN:
OLIVIA SHEEHAN

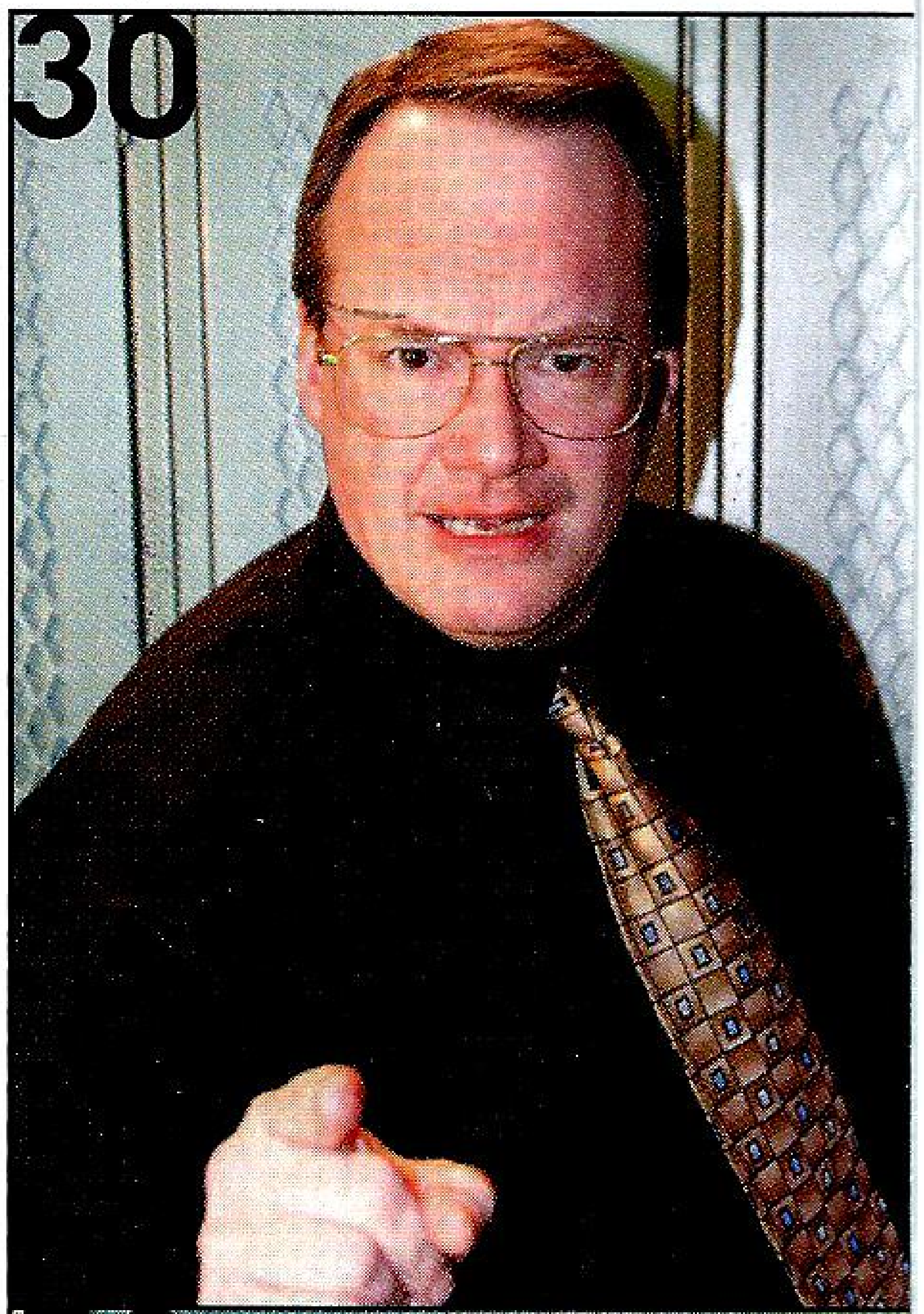
FEATURES

30 Q & A: JIM CORNETTE
Although Jim Cornette is well known for his on-screen roles, his behind-the-scenes contributions to professional wrestling may be even more noteworthy. In this compelling interview with Senior Writer Dan Murphy, the "Louisville Lip" discusses his earliest experiences in the wrestling business, the tumultuous relationship with Paul Heyman, and a host of other controversial topics

48 KNEEDROPS, ELBOWDROPS ... TEARDROPS: FLAIR LEAVES HIS HEART IN ORLANDO
WrestleMania 24 saw one of the industry's greatest stars end his ring career at the hands of another icon in Orlando, Florida. Ric Flair may have ended his tenure with a loss, but the memory of his departure will be one for the books

52 CHIKARA KING OF TRIOS: LINCE DORADO'S RETURN FROM DARKNESS
Just months ago, luchador Lince Dorado was temporarily paralyzed after a routine maneuver went awry. At CHIKARA's second installment of its annual King of Trios tournament, the high-flying star returned to defeat his opponents in the ring—and in his head

58 SAMOA JOE: "GET SERIOUS OR GET HURT!"
Amid the Angle family theatrics and "Fish Market" streetfights, Samoa Joe is the one man acting as a constant reminder to his opponents in TNA that wrestling is serious business and he isn't playing any games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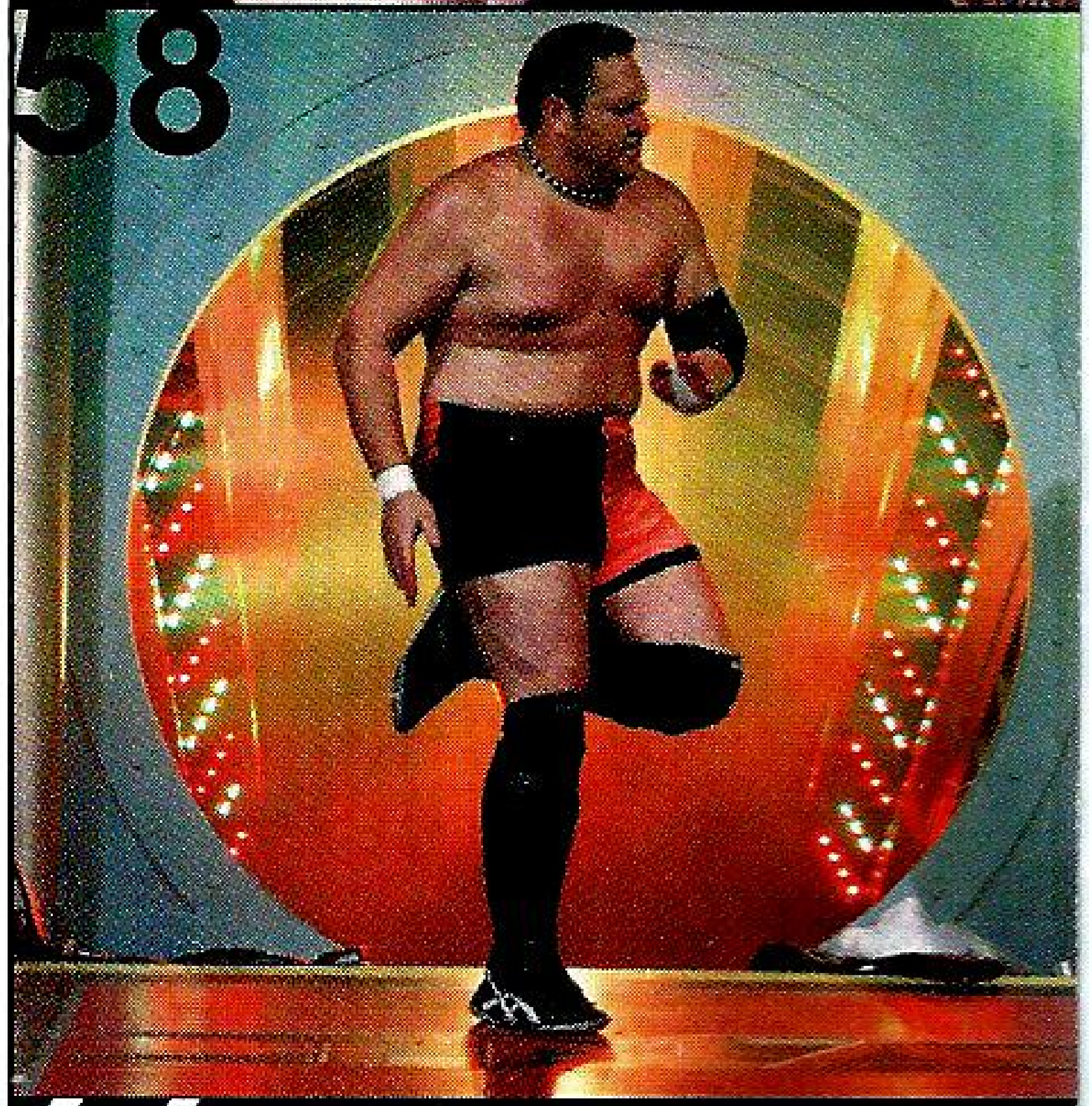
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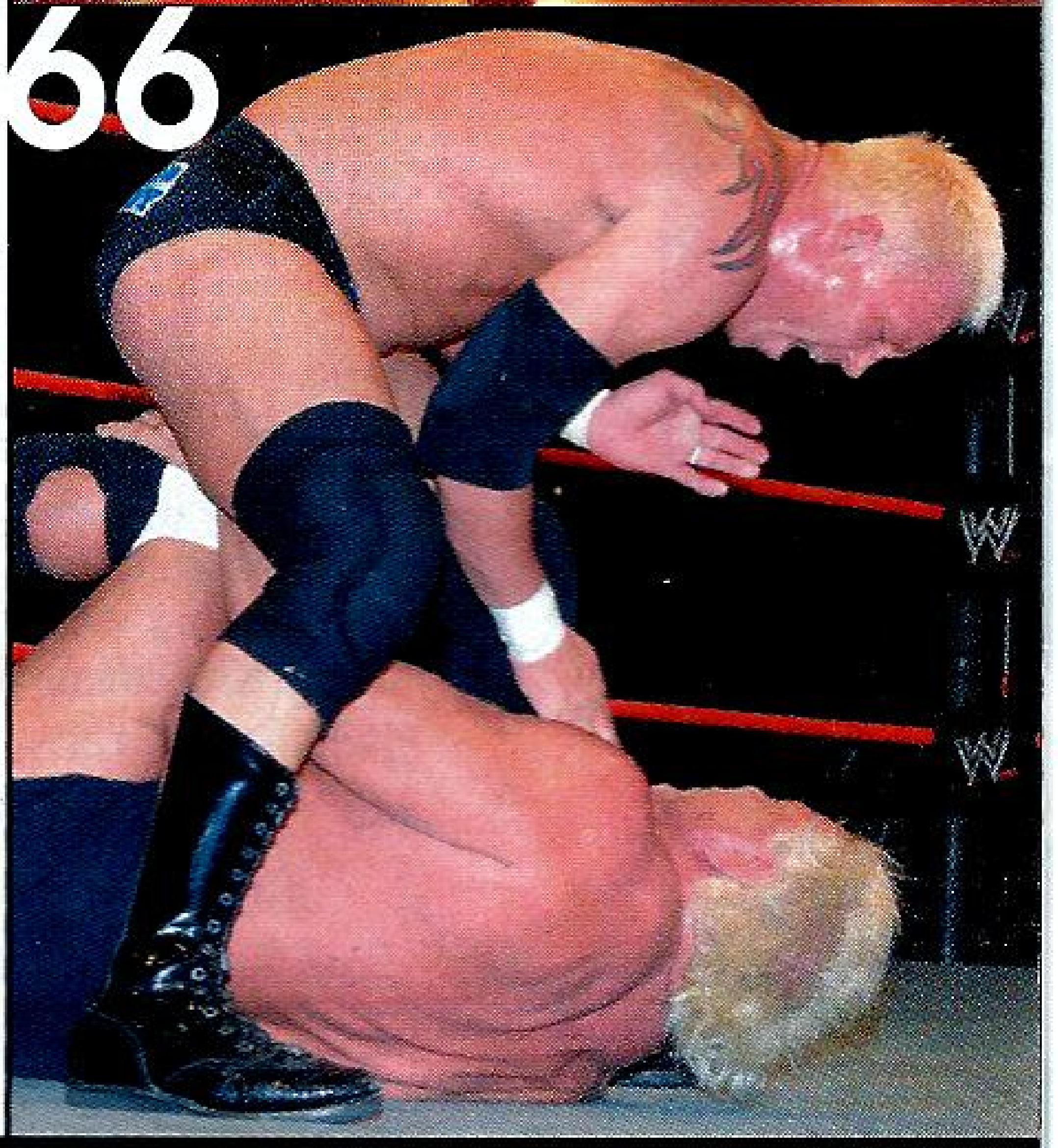
66

DEPARTMENTS

4 **YOUR LETTERS**
6 **WHAT'S HAPPENING** BY BRADY HICKS
12 **KREW-CUTS** WITH FRANK KREWDA
14 **ON ASSIGNMENT** BY LIZ HUNTER
16 **THUMBS UP, THUMBS DOWN**
18 **POINT/COUNTERPOINT**
20 **INTRODUCING ... THE YOUNG BUCKS**
22 **WORKIN' STIFF** BY AL CASTLE
24 **SPOTLIGHT ON ... THE BIG SHOW**
66 **THE WRESTLING ANALYST: KEN KENNEDY**
72 **OFFICIAL WRESTLING RATINGS**
74 **REMEMBER HER?**

Look for the Volume 23, 2008, issue of *The Wrestler/Inside Wrestling* on sale July 8, 2008

YOUR LETTERS

JBL may cut an ominous figure in the ring, but reader Vikki Rachunek says getting a shot at the WWE Raw World title requires more than intense looks and fighting words. Vikki feels JBL was out of line for demanding a title match with champ Randy Orton.

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER

JBL's recent demand for a shot at Randy Orton's Raw title really burns me up. I understand JBL is a former Smackdown champ and a successful businessman, but that doesn't automatically qualify him for a shot at Orton's title. Nobody forced JBL to retire, and it's too bad if calling matches from ringside doesn't satisfy his lust for the limelight.

While Layfield has no doubt manhandled Finlay, Hornswoggle, and Chris Jericho, that hardly proves that he deserves an opportunity to become the Raw World champion. So far, JBL's done nothing to earn that opportunity other than run his big mouth. Championships are earned through performance, not words. Somebody needs to remind JBL of that. Until he earns his stripes in the ring, JBL should just stick to talking about stocks on the Fox Network.

VIKKI RACHUNEK
Boston, MA

ODB'S GOT IT

Of all the TNA Knockouts, I believe ODB is really the only one who poses a long-term threat to Awesome Kong's title reign. Gail Kim, for example, certainly has the athletic ability to outwrestle Kong. In fact, she's already done it once. But only ODB has the attitude necessary to unseat a wrestler of Kong's power for an extended period of time.

Kim—and just about every other lady competing in TNA—is either unable or unwilling to summon the raw brutality it will take to unseat Kong once and for all. But I'm confident ODB can do it. She may not be very graceful, and she's probably downright offensive to some TNA fans, but ODB is the only TNA Knockout capable of beating Awesome Kong at her own game.

DENNIS LONG
Tampa, FL

COATES IS ROTTEN

I was lucky enough to attend NWA Anarchy's Hardcore Hell '08 in Cornelia, Georgia. I loved the show, but I was really disappointed in the outcome of the Brodie Chase vs. Don Matthews match.

Melissa Coates is rotten to the core. I don't understand what Matthews ever saw in her. And he was

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If winning is an attitude, ODB has enough of it to dethrone current TNA Knockout champ Awesome Kong. Reader Dennis Long of Tampa, Florida, says ODB is the only Knockout with enough moxie to overthrow Kong once and for all.

awfully naïve to expect that Coates would've called the match down the middle as a referee. Anybody could see she had it in for him!

I hope that after the way she cost him the match and embarrassed him, Matthews has enough sense to stay away from her. Hardcore Hell proved Coates is treacherous, and bad for Matthews' career.

CHUCK SMITH
Cornelia, GA

JEFF ON HARD(Y) TIMES

I read about all the bad luck that has befallen Jeff Hardy recently, specifically the fire that claimed his house and dog, as well as the WWE suspension. What a shame. Jeff is a truly special talent and seems dedicated to giving WWE fans their money's worth any time he performs.

I sincerely hope Jeff can get his life together so he can come back to the ring and continue thrilling his fans. Hang in there, Jeff! Your fans are pulling for you!

JASON PALLADINO
Scranton, PA

GREAT INTERVIEW

After reading Bill Apter's interview with the great Nick Bockwinkel ("Q&A", THE WRESTLER/*Inside Wrestling*, Volume 21, 2008), all I can say is, "Bravo!" Apter did a masterful job posing tough but fair questions that begged honest answers, and Bockwinkel replied in kind with seemingly sincere replies.

It was also refreshing to read the comments of a wrestling hero from a bygone era who doesn't seem bitter or disenchanted with the current product. Bockwinkel's stories of the AWA were compelling and thoughtful. It's no wonder he was know as "the most intelligent wrestler alive."

CHARLES HENDERSON JR.
Chicago, IL ☐

WHAT'S HAPPENING

AFTER FOUR MONTHS of questions, second guessing, and impending regret by wrestling fans, it is now official: **Ric Flair** has retired from wrestling. The 36-year veteran walks away from the ring a 16-time NWA, WCW, and WWF/E World champion, and had been closing in on his fifth decade as an active performer before that fateful superkick at the feet of **Shawn Michaels** in the closing moments of their standout WrestleMania 24 match.

For the casual viewer tuning in to hear Flair's WWE Hall of Fame induction speech the night before WrestleMania, it was difficult to watch Flair, with tears streaming from his eyes, recount all the memories, experiences, and friendships that have made up his legendary career. And only two nights later, on Raw, there was not a dry eye in the house as Flair welcomed surprise visits from past allies and enemies alike, as well as current colleagues, among them **Triple-H**, **Batista**, **John Cena**, and Michaels. Former Four Horsemen members **Arn Anderson**, **Tully Blanchard**, **Barry Windham**, and **J.J. Dillon** also showed up. And as Raw went off the air, the final sight was of a visibly-shaking Flair—surrounded by friends and family—as the entire WWE roster and arena of fans clapped and cheered for their hero.

Of course, when a man such as Flair spends more than half of his life doing a job he truly loves (and at which he excels), it is difficult to believe he could ever truly walk away. Many speculate Flair will enter some sort of non-wrestling, **Steve Austin**-type retirement. Others are clamoring for Flair to try his hand at managing or announcing. There are also rumors "Slick Ric" might even assume some sort of backstage role within the company.

One man who did not get to say goodbye to Flair on Raw was **Jeff Hardy**. Recently, the younger Hardy brother has fallen upon rough times, dropping his Intercontinental title to **Chris Jericho**, then losing his uninsured Cameron, North Carolina, home to a fire only days later.

Although Ric Flair and Triple-H have spilled each other's blood in the ring over the years, HHH was one of the many performers who joined in Flair's post-'Mania send off on the March 30 episode of Raw.

BY BRADY HICKS

While neither Jeff nor his girlfriend, Beth, were home at the time of the fire, his dog perished in the blaze. On top of these difficulties, Hardy also failed a WWE Wellness Program test and was suspended without pay for 60 days. The suspension is the second in the past year for the popular performer and an indication to many that his days on Raw could be numbered if he does not make some changes.

Of course, Hardy has always had a tendency to land on his feet, and these difficult times could prove to be nothing different. After leaving WWE of his own volition in 2002, Hardy later landed a job with TNA, where he frequently competed as a main-eventer. Prior to his most recent suspension, many of Hardy's peers believed his difficulties were behind him, and there is even some optimism that he's already made some necessary changes.

Jeff Hardy gives Randy Orton a shot in the chops, but lately it's been Jeff who's been taking it on the chin. So far in 2008, Hardy has lost his house, his dog, and his job ... temporarily anyway. He was suspended 60 days without pay for violating WWE's Wellness Policy.

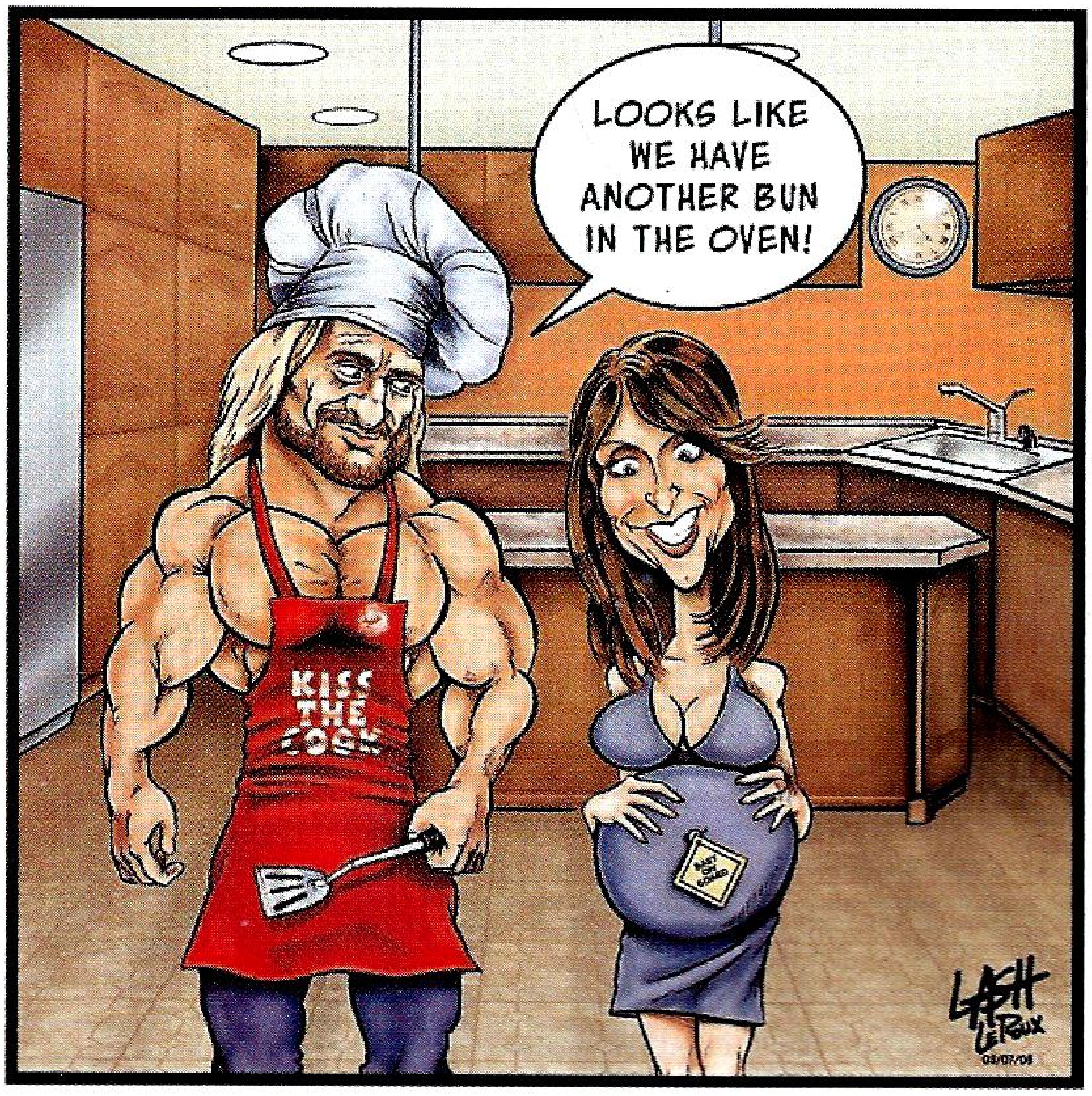
While Hardy is expected to return in the spring, wrestling fans the world over are mourning the more eternal loss of legendary World Class Championship Wrestling booker and manager **Gary Williams**, better known as **Gary Hart**, who was found dead of a heart attack in his home in Euless, Texas.

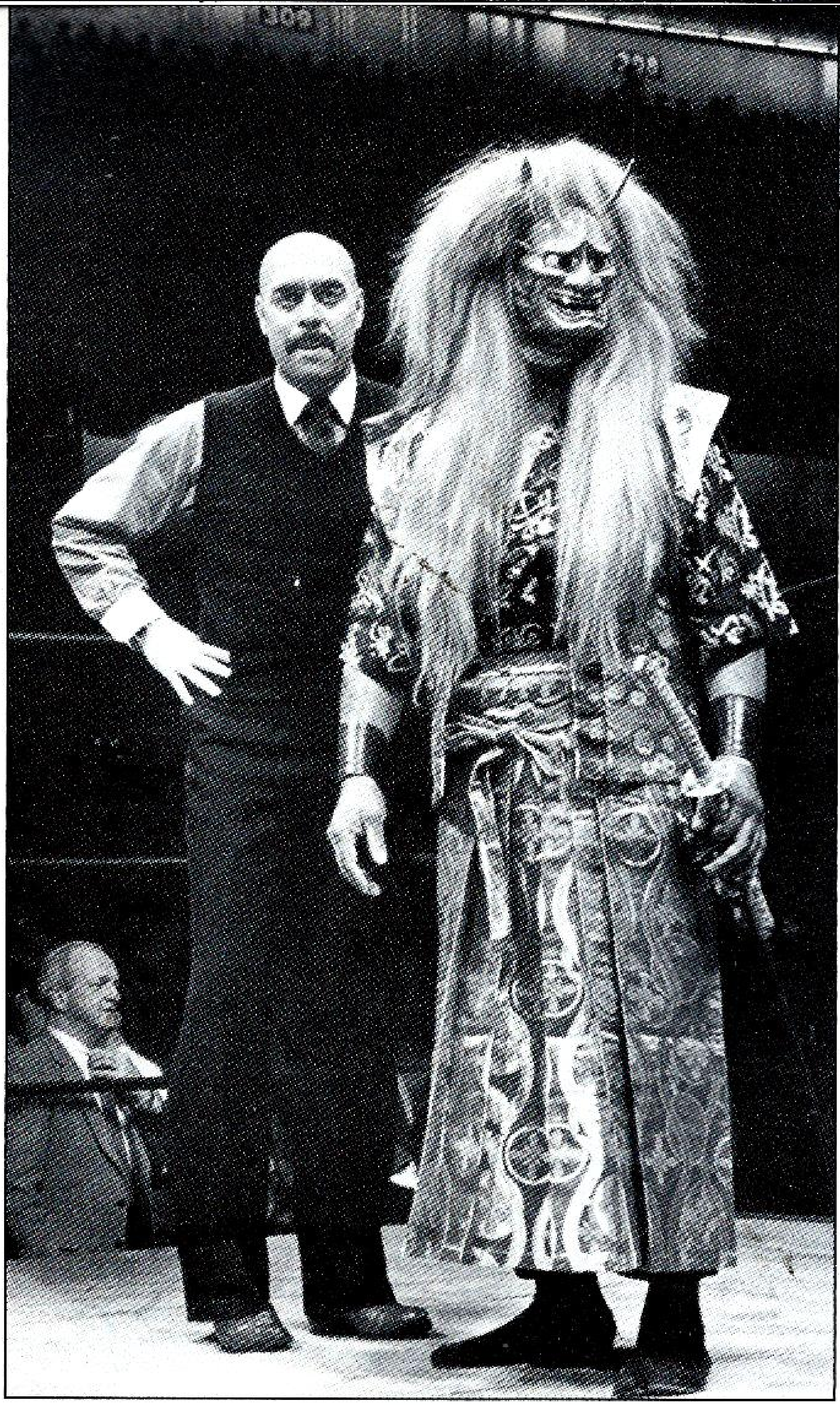
Hart was a wrestler himself in the 1960s (and, later, the 1990s), but he found his real talent was in guiding talent from outside the ring. In the 1980s, Hart was considered a vital member of WCCW. He is also credited with discovering **Chris Adams** and **Gino Hernandez** and played a crucial role in feuds with both the **Von Erich** family and **The Fabulous Freebirds**. The 66-year-old Hart had just returned home from an autograph session when he was found dead.

Several other stars have also passed away in recent weeks, among them former WCW wrestler **Chase Tatum**. Tatum's two-year run saw him team up with **Master P** and his No Limit Soldiers faction. He was also a bodybuilder and actor,

"LASHING OUT!"

By Lash LeRoux


LOOKS LIKE WE HAVE ANOTHER BUN IN THE OVEN!
KISS THE COOK
LASH LeRoux
03/07/08



Gary Hart was a wrestler early on, but is best remembered for his role in creating and managing young stars, such as the Great Kabuki. Hart recently passed away at age 66 in his Texas home.

most recently performing in the recent film *Who's Your Caddy* alongside rapper **Big Boi** of Outkast, for whom he also served as a road manager and personal assistant. Tatum, 34, appeared to be the victim of an accidental drug overdose. Also lost was former 1950s and 1960s NWA tag team champion—and later Florida-area promoter—**Don Curtis**, a.k.a. **Don Beitelman**. Curtis never fully recovered after suffering a stroke in February.

Former WCW wrestler **"Hardbody" Harrison Norris**, 42, was sentenced to life behind bars after being convicted of kidnapping women and promoting a prostitution and forced-labor ring out of his Atlanta, Georgia, home. Norris, who was first convicted last November on charges of conspiracy, commercial trafficking, and witness tampering, allegedly lured the women, many of whom were homeless or drug-addicted, by claiming he would train them to become professional wrestlers in his all-female promotion. Once there, Norris and his co-conspirator kept the women against their will as prostitutes and servants.

On a more positive note, Pro Wrestling Revolution star **Brimstone** is preparing to release his autobiography, a book tentatively titled *Brimstone: From the Barren Wastelands Of My Mind*. The near-300-pounder is planning an open-to-the-public release party at the Times Square Arts Center's Laugh Factory in New York City. During this party, Brimstone will also offer a fashion show featuring his new lineup of BrimWEAR branded clothing.

Total Nonstop Action has recently been seeing the payoff of their hard work after a volatile half-decade. Coming on the heels of TNA's first live airing of *Impact* on Spike TV, many industry insiders see a bright future for the company. It is widely understood that the company is no longer relying on Panda Energy's financial support, which would mean that WWE's competitor is now an autonomous, profitable company.

With only a few days (and miles) separating the show from WrestleMania in Orlando, TNA delivered the return of one of wrestling's biggest legends, **Sting**. On the show, Sting agreed to align once again with **Christian Cage**, this time joining Cage's Lethal Lockdown team of **Kevin Nash** and **Rhino** against a group—led by **Travis Tomko**—that included **A.J. Styles** and **Team 3D**. However, after picking up the win for his team in an eight-man tag team match his first night back, Sting was the victim of a brutal beer bottle assault by **James Storm**. In a side note from *Impact*, one of the "celebrities" in the crowd at *Impact* was WWE-contracted star **Derek Graham-Couch**, who is better known to wrestling fans as **Robbie McAllister** of **The Highlanders**. Graham-Couch, who was in Orlando for an extended WrestleMania weekend, took in some of the action before inexplicably leaving the arena, presumably at the request of his employer.

It seems the WWE-TNA story may be finally beginning ... ☐

Super heavyweight Brimstone is branching out beyond Pro Wrestling Revolution. The indy standout will soon release an autobiography and launch his new line of BrimWEAR clothing.

KREW-CUTS

WITH FRANK KREWDA

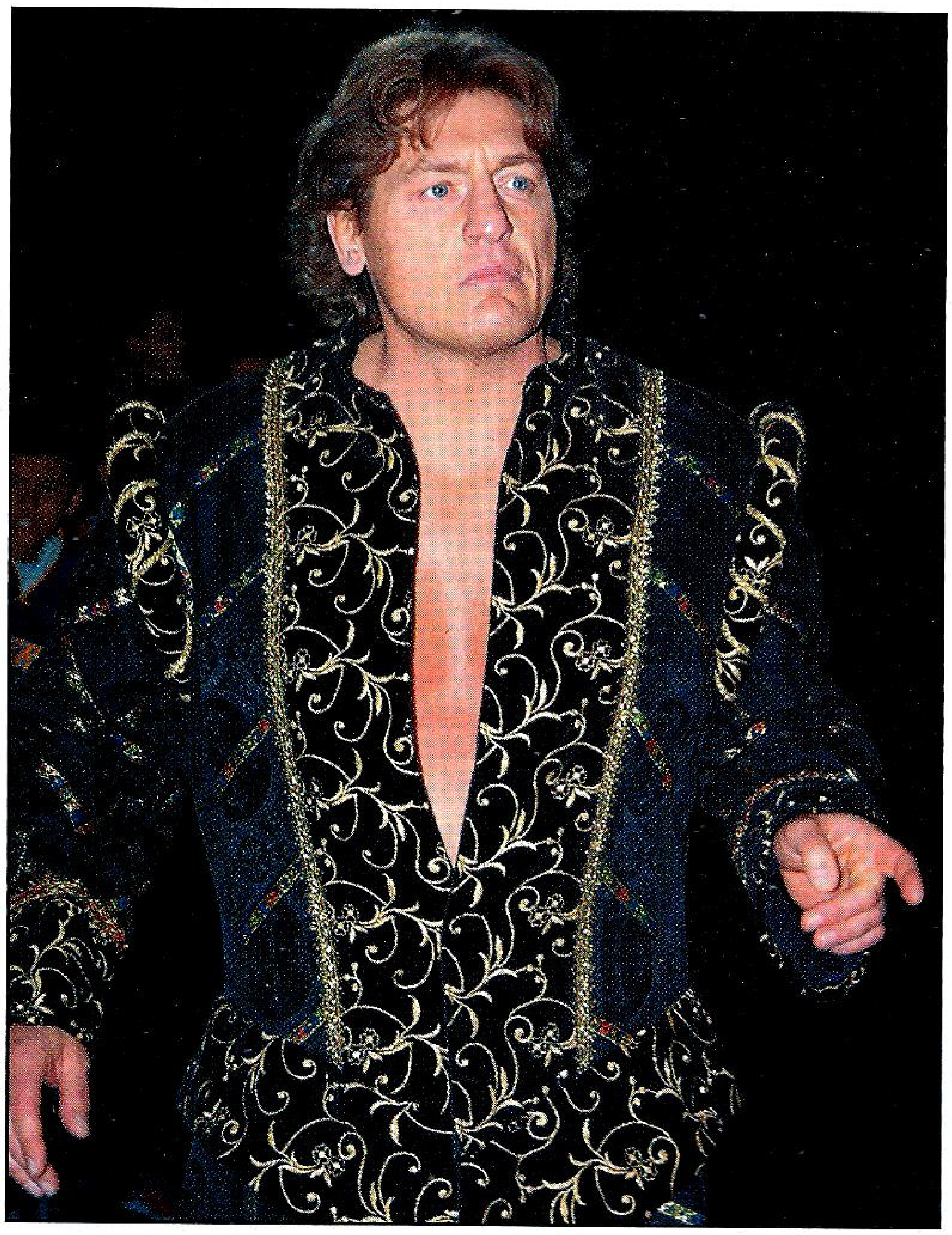
NO END IN SIGHT. Ever wish the McMahons would relinquish the chokehold they have on professional wrestling—for better or worse? Pine for the days when Eric Bischoff and Paul Heyman prodded WWE to produce more compelling shows each week? Like to see TNA in the same stratum as WWE?

If you answered "yes" to any of those questions, chances are you'll be disheartened by an article on www.orlandosentinel.com that all but confirms wrestling's first family has no intentions of giving up power—not now, not next year, not ever.

In the March 27 article, "The McMahons Have a Choke Hold On Wrestling Business," Vince was rightly praised for transforming pro wrestling from a collection of regional fiefdoms into a global juggernaut. He was also criticized for profiting from society's baser tastes.

The most salient point, however, is the McMahon commitment to keeping WWE in the family. While Vince allegedly declined an interview, his wife and WWE CEO Linda pretty much summed up their future plans, "Shane and Stephanie are embedded here. In 20, 30 years from now, if they're not going to want to run the company, maybe their children will."

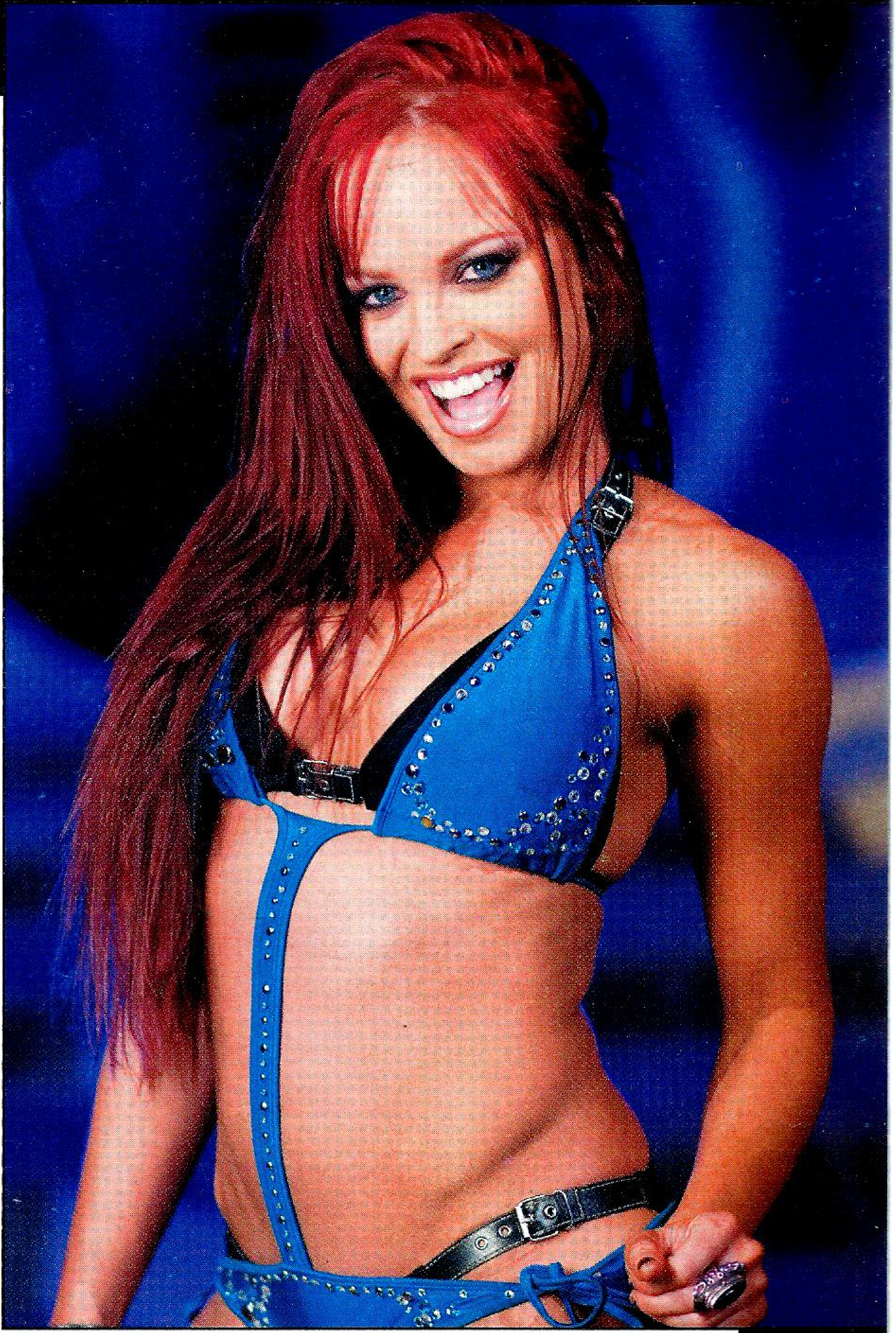
Good for the McMahons; mixed bag for wrestling fans. The McMahons may have the most qualified hands to steer the ship for years to come. But they, or at least Vince, also uses those hands to choke the life out of the competition, which isn't so good for the future of the business.



Raw General Manager William Regal is entertaining on Raw each week. But why can't he pronounce Umaga's name correctly? Frank Krewda thinks Regal's poor verbal skills might've curtailed his role at WrestleMania 24.

WWE NOTES. Hard to believe WWE saw fit to limit William Regal involvement in this year's WrestleMania card. Then again, maybe not. You'd think the Raw general manager would be able to at least properly introduce a wrestler from his own brand. I get a kick out of the added and dropped "H"s (as in Triple-Haitch), but Umaga isn't a difficult name to pronounce. Coming from a man of Regal's breeding, "Yoo-mang-a" is unacceptable ... Been a rough spell for Jeff Hardy recently. First, he was briefly suspended from WWE for a second violation of the company's drug policy, and then his dog perishes in a fire that also claimed Jeff's house ... I rarely disagree with anything Jerry Lawler has to say, but I think he's totally off-base on the whole Beth Phoenix-Maria-Melina triangle of hate. The King recently opined on Raw that Melina and Phoenix were "jealous of Maria because she was chosen to be on the cover of *Playboy* this spring. My point of contention: Both Melina and Beth have time (and looks) on their side. Either one, both actually, will contend for that honor for years to come. If anything, both ladies probably draw inspiration from Maria herself, who claims *Playboy* had asked her to pose years ago when she was 19 years old … Gotta wonder if Big Show's recent weight loss was directly connected to his prominent spot at WrestleMania versus Floyd Mayweather. During a 15-month hiatus, Show started training with an eye on breaking into pro boxing. He ended up losing more than 100 pounds in the process. Imagine if he had pursued his pugilistic passion years ago. He might've become one of the most dominant wrestling champions of all-time.

TNA NOTES. In an effort to build brand recognition, TNA has partnered with Joe Hand Promotions Inc. The promoter will serve as TNA's exclusive commercial distributor for pay-per-view events in the United States and Canada, beginning with April 13's Lockdown 2008 card. Terms of the agreement allow all 12 of TNA's PPVs to be shown in public venues such as restaurants and bars … TNA has also named Houston-based Tristar Promotions as the exclusive licensee for trading cards and memorabilia. TNA and Tristar have a series of three sets of trading cards slated for release. The first set, due out this spring, will be called "TNA Impact." The second set, due out in the fall, has been tentatively titled "Cross the Line." A third set, dubbed "TNA Knockouts," is scheduled to be released in time for the 2008 holidays … Back in the day, promotions discouraged feuding wrestlers, and in some cases ordered them, not to socialize or fraternize with each other—at least not in public. WWE issued something of a similar edict before heading into Orlando during WrestleMania weekend in late-March. Word had spread that some TNA superstars had purchased tickets to the WWE Hall of Fame induction ceremony. It was also public knowledge that some WWE performers attended some TNA live shows. Apparently WWE was uncomfortable with the level of contact between members of the organization and asked WWE members to keep to themselves. Not sure if WWE superstars were allowed to hang out with Ring of Honor superstars during WM Weekend. ROH also ran shows in Orlando at the time.



Tristar Promotions will release three installments of TNA trading cards. Christy Hemme and the other Knockouts are due out by the 2008 holiday season.

BUZZCUTS. Leave it to an obscure independent promotion in Indiana to bring some sanity to an otherwise insane situation. Pro Wrestling Riot has instituted a three-strike policy against referee abuse. Due to the increase of referee injuries, ostensibly at the hands of the competitors, the promotion's new Referee Protection Policy says violators will be fined $1,000 for a first offense. Second offense warrants a 30-day suspension. A third offense gets violators banished from the promotion forever … Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie are said to be renting a Cedar Creek, Texas, ranch house owned by The Undertaker … Manager extraordinaire and playboy Gary Hart passed away in late-March at age 66. Former WCW wrestler Chase Tatum also died in March. Tatum's father suspects Chase accidentally overdosed on painkillers that were prescribed following back surgery. Spurred by Tatum's death and the need to promote an upcoming book, Buff Bagwell publicly decried the ongoing drug problem in professional wrestling. By Buff's count, he's wrestled 36 dead wrestlers. ☐

ON ASSIGNMENT

THE FINAL TWO weeks of March 2008 were two of the most exciting and fascinating weeks in wrestling since Vince McMahon bought WCW in the spring of 2001.

WWE was in the final push for WrestleMania, TNA had its first live edition of *Impact* on Spike TV, and Ring of Honor opened the doors to Japan's Dragon's Gate promotion for a two-night stand in Orlando during WrestleMania weekend.

There are plenty of topics to write about in the wake of those two historic weeks, but there's one item I feel the need to address that might not have registered on the radar of the average fan during all of the excitement. On March 16, former wrestler and manager Gary Hart passed away at his home in Euless, Texas.

Hart was one of the most successful managers and most influential bookers of the 1980s. He started his career as a wrestler in the 1960s, eventually adopting the nickname "Playboy" Gary Hart, but it was in managing that Hart truly excelled. Hart guided the career of a veritable Who's Who of stars, including Roddy Piper, Bruiser Brody, The Great Muta, The Spoiler, The Great Kabuki, and Abdullah the Butcher, to name just a handful.

During the 1980s, Hart was a manager and a backstage booker in World Class Championship Wrestling. He was responsible for bringing The Fabulous Freebirds into Texas and building the legendary feud between the Freebirds and the Von Erichs. While he and Von Erich patriarch Fritz Von Erich were archenemies in public, behind the scenes they worked together to help make Dallas-Fort Worth one of the hottest wrestling territories in the world in the early-1980s.

Hart was unlike the other great managers of his era. He didn't wear gaudy outfits like Jimmy Hart, Capt. Lou Albano, or Bobby Heenan. He didn't carry a prop that outraged fans—no tennis rackets, megaphones, canes, or portable phones. He didn't run into the ring and end up getting bumped around or having his fancy clothes torn up. He didn't yell and scream in interviews or tape rubber bands to his face to call attention to himself.

He simply stared into the camera and, in a soft and steady tone of voice, tell the fans what evil plans his stable of villains had. He was the most believable personification of evil in wrestling.

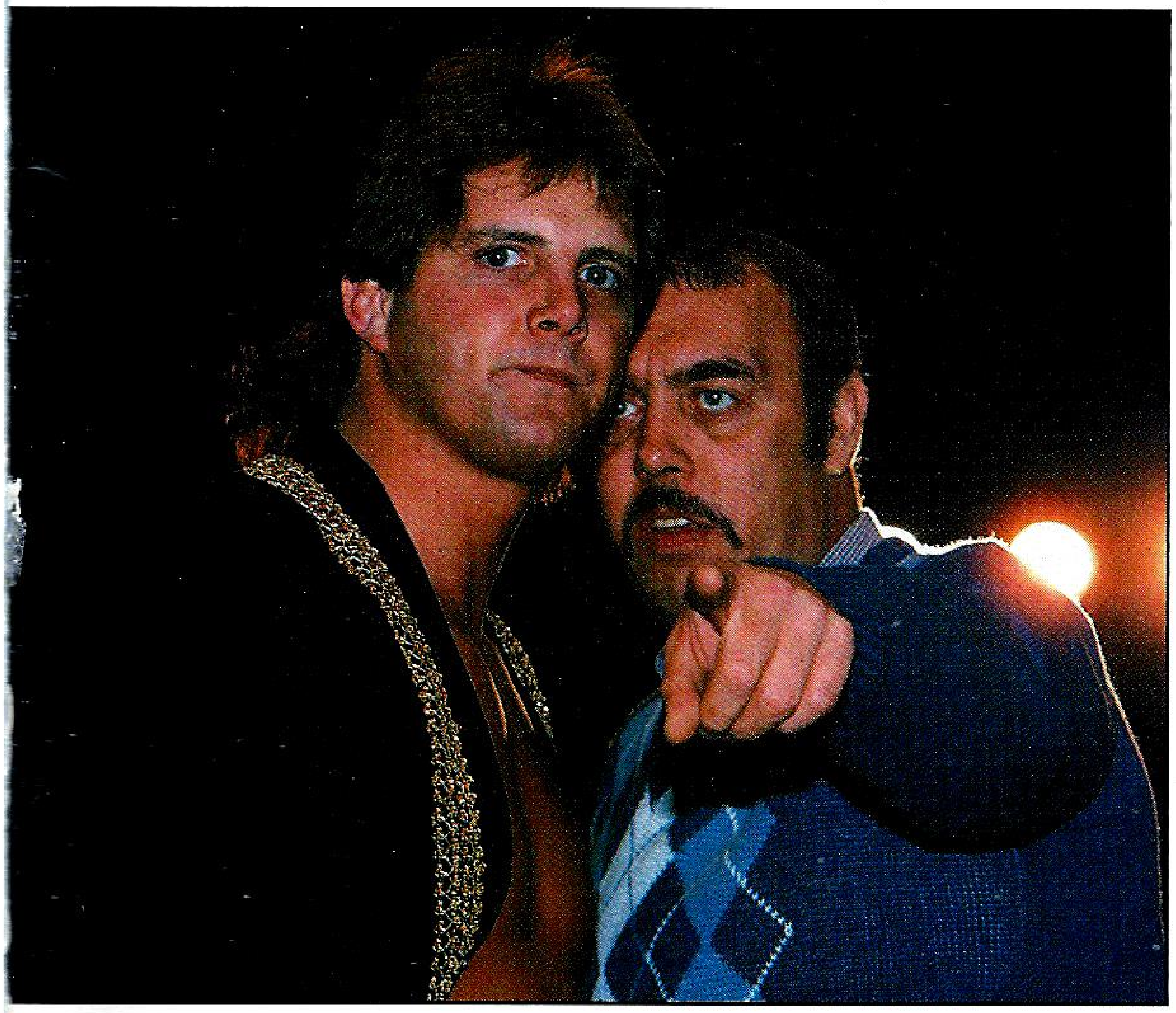
And he scared the living daylights out of me.

I had a special attachment to the World Class territory, as the company was hitting its stride right around the time I started writing for this family of magazines. After attending a few shows at the old Sportatorium, I got a chance to meet Chris Adams, who became one of my closest friends in the wrestling business at the time.

In September 1984, Chris teamed with Kevin Von Erich in a match against Jake Roberts and Gino Hernandez. I was sitting beneath the crow's nest where the wrestlers snuck to watch the matches, looking on as Adams was

"Playboy" Gary Hart chokes Jerry Brisco in a May '73 chain match. Hart entered the wrestling world as a competitor in the 1960s, but it was managing top names in the 1980s that gave Hart his greatest success.

BY LIZ HUNTER



Carrying a reputation as one of wrestling's most evil villains, Hart shared his vile genius with many superstars, such as Chris Adams. After an introduction from Adams, Contributing Writer Liz Hunter found Hart also had an endearing side.

pinned by Hernandez. After the match, Chris screamed at Stella Mae French, who had been his valet since his feud against Jimmy Garvin and Precious a few months earlier. Von Erich tried to keep the peace, but Chris was having none of it. Like a viper, Hart went to slap French, and a man just didn't hit a lady under any circumstances in Texas. Von Erich grabbed Hart, and Adams laid out Von Erich with a superkick, aligning himself with Hart and his evil cadre of miscreants.

I waited to see Chris after the show and angrily asked him why he would associate with somebody as slimy as Hart. Adams laughed, which irritated me even more. "Liz, maybe you should have a chat with Gary."

Chris pulled me over to Hart, who was talking with Gino, and he introduced us. To my surprise, Hart was nothing like the scheming, Machiavellian misogynist he portrayed in the ring. He was sweet, polite, and actually quite charming. He was so good at being the bad guy that I had never even paused to consider that he might actually be a nice guy.

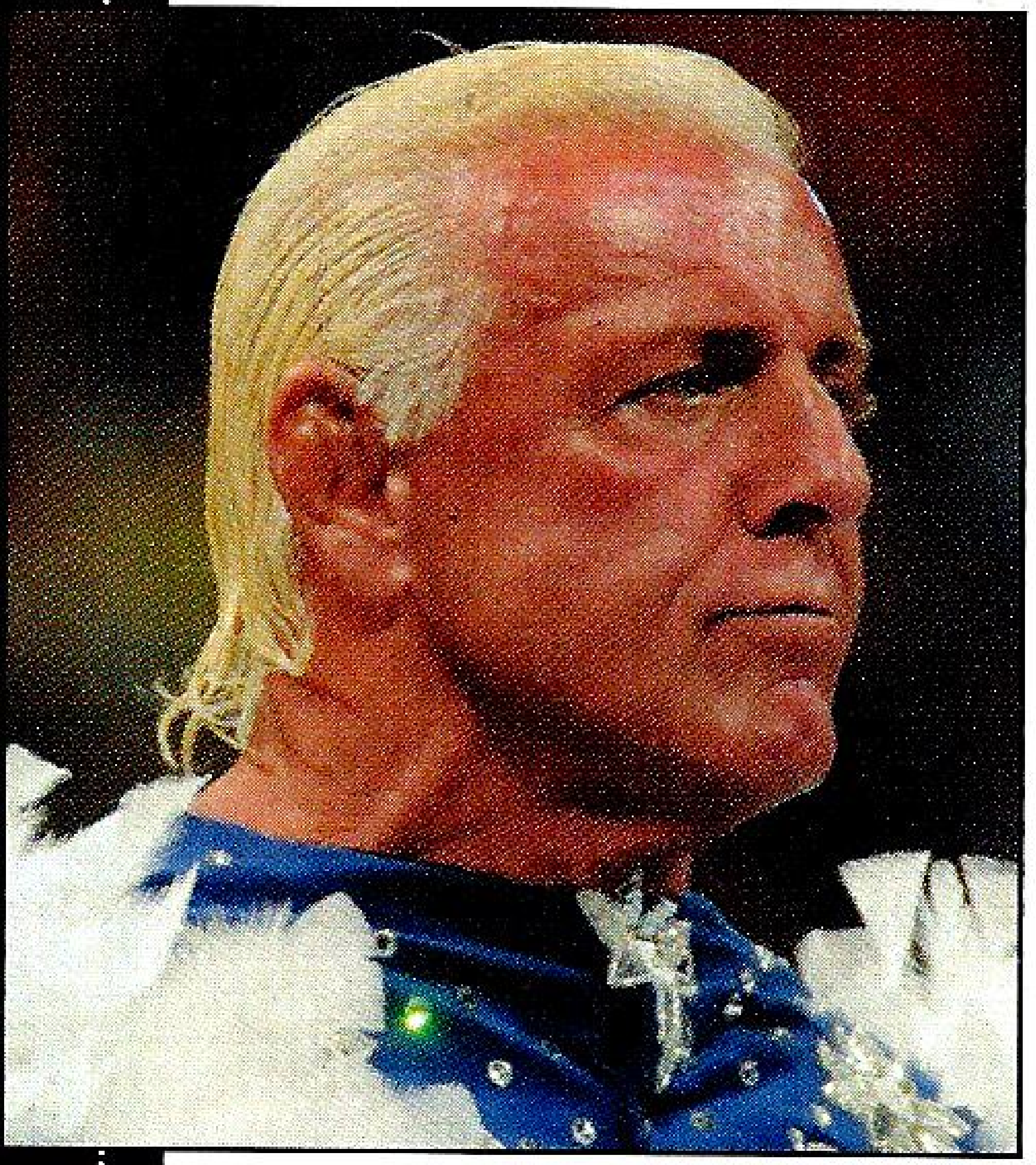
It turns out that Hart was much more than a nice guy. He was a mentor to wrestlers like Gino, Chris, and Muta. He was a tremendous promoter and was always brimming with ideas. He had an innate understanding for how the wrestling business worked, and he passionately cared about the success of the business.

You might even call Hart a hero. In February 1975, Hart was involved in a plane crash in Tampa Bay. Realizing the plane was going down, Hart unfastened his safety belt and was thrown clear when the plane slammed into the bay. Gary suffered a host of injuries in that horrific crash, including the loss of vision in one eye, a broken back, severe lacerations, a fractured sternum, a fractured collarbone, a broken arm, and several shattered teeth. Despite those injuries, Hart had the presence of mind to swim back to the plane and rescue fellow wrestlers Mike McCord (who would later adopt the name Austin Idol) and Buddy Colt. A fourth wrestler, Bobby Shane, drowned, which haunted Hart for the rest of his life.

Hart never had the opportunity to work for WWE, though there were plans at one point to bring him to the company in 1989 (managing Earthquake) and as recently as 2006 (managing Umaga). It never worked out, but Hart was content with his life outside of wrestling. His son, Chad, made his wrestling debut a few years ago, and Hart was reportedly happy to see his son put on the boots and carry on the family name.

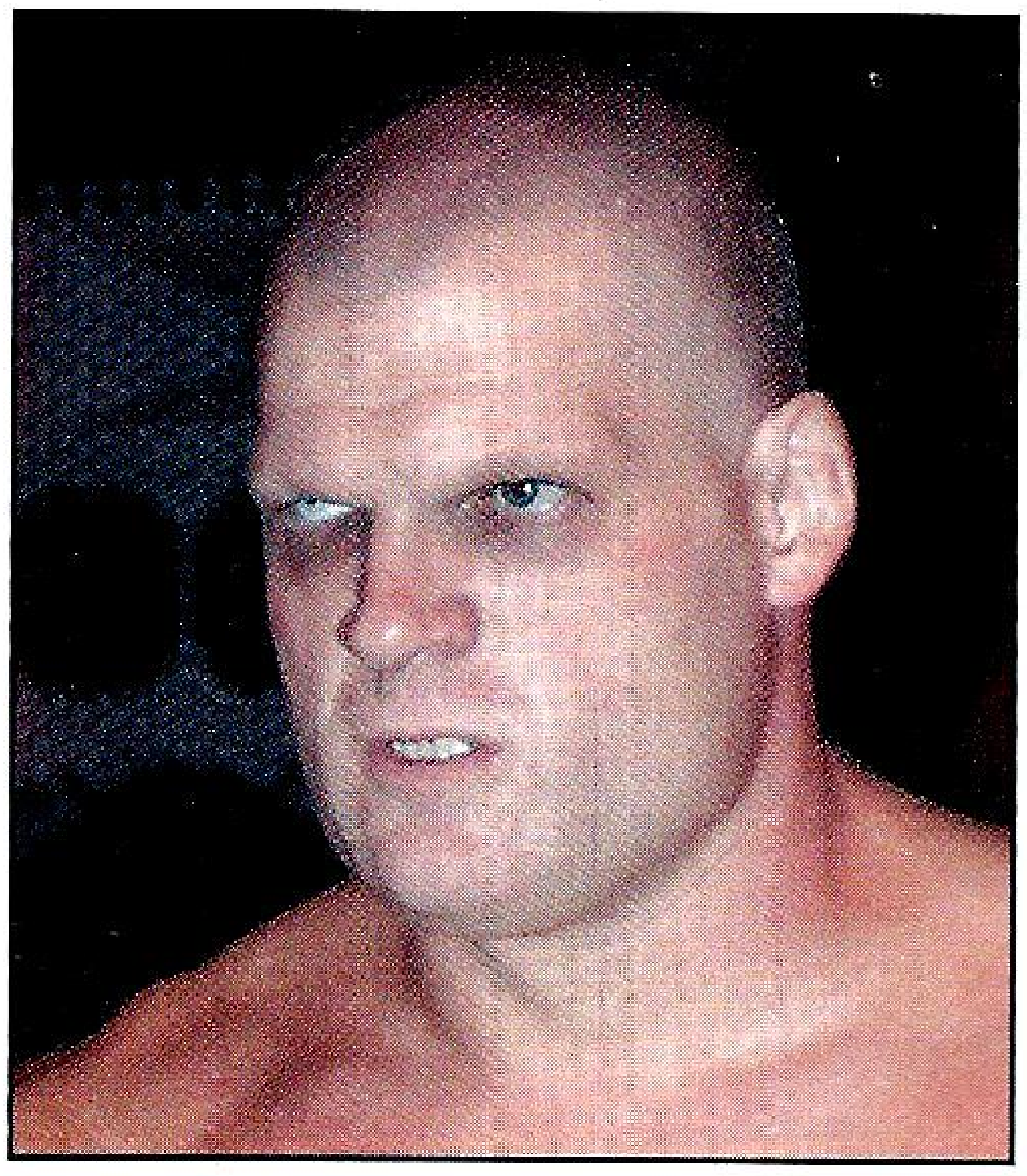
In recent years, Hart finally got some credit that was long overdue with the release of the *Heroes Of World Class* and *The Triumph And Tragedy of World Class Championship Wrestling*, both of which feature very candid and heartfelt interviews with Hart. I hope fans viewing those DVDs have the same realization I did down in Dallas so many years ago. Gary Hart was a great villain. More importantly, he was a great man. □

THUMBS UP



Thumbs Up to Ric Flair. It may be the last chance to do so; therefore, consider this a huge thumbs up to the legendary career of "Naitch." For a man who brought so much to the sport, it's only fitting that his last match would be an instant classic with Shawn Michaels in front of 70,000-plus in the Citrus Bowl at WrestleMania 24. His achievements are far too voluminous to be listed here, so the best that can be done is to give the "Nature Boy" one last thumbs up as he salsas his way off into the sunset.

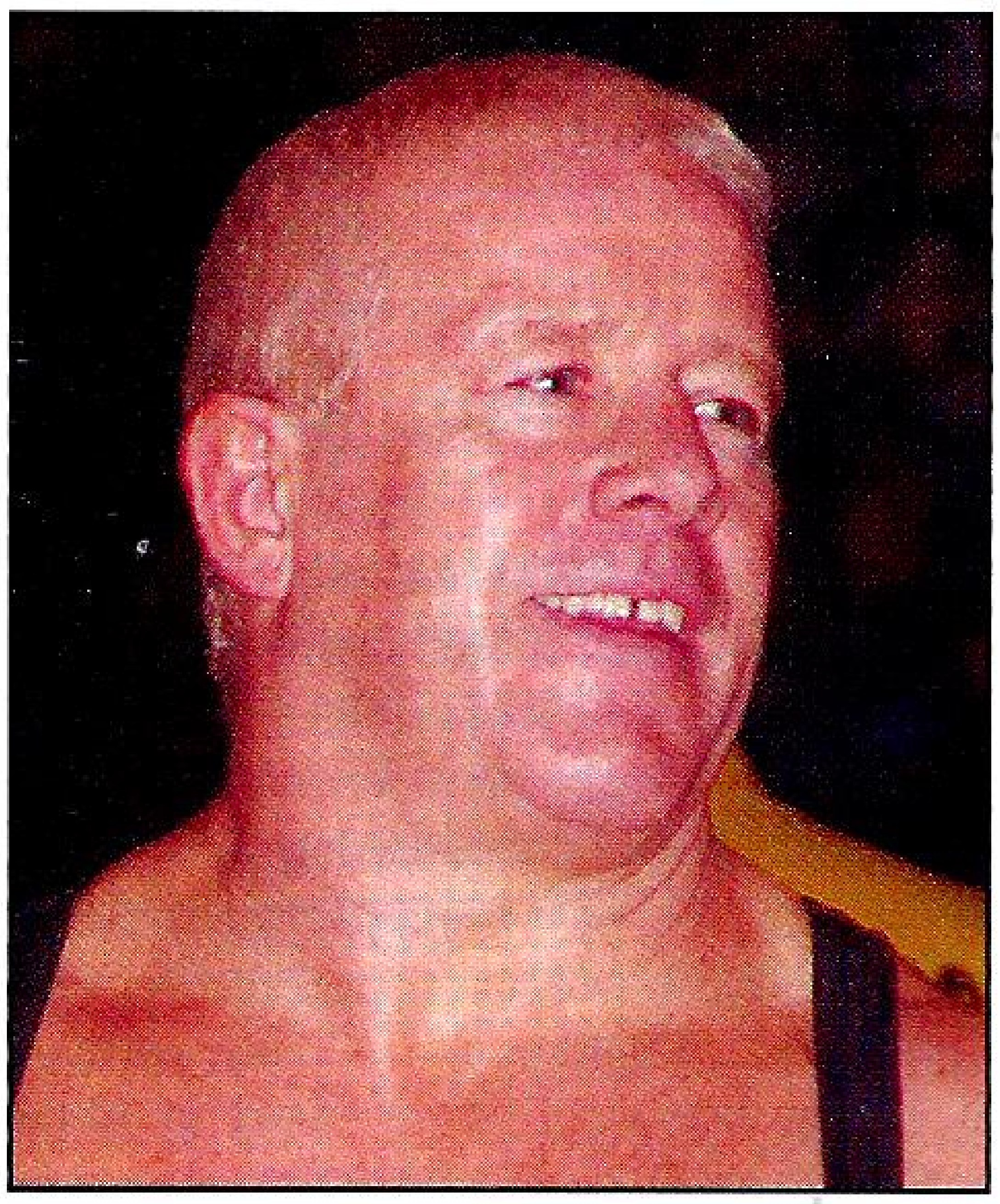
Thumbs Up to Kane. Sure, it may have taken him nearly six years to regain singles championship gold, but when Kane captured the ECW title in a record-setting defeat of Chavo Guerrero Jr. at WrestleMania 24, something just felt right. In the land of extreme, the former Jacob Goodnight undoubtedly stood out amongst his peers and deserved a shot at being the best the hardcore brand had to offer. Even better is the fact that Kane's title reign surpassed the length of time he was WWF World champion a decade ago by the time ECW aired on the Tuesday night following 'Mania.



Thumbs Up to The Undertaker. 'Taker's phenomenal streak ran to 16-0 with his victory at WrestleMania 24 over then-Smackdown World champion Edge. What earns the "Dead Man" the thumbs up here is not necessarily his ability to keep the streak alive, but rather the manner in which he's done so over the past two springtime classics. Defeating Batista at 'Mania 23 to win the gold was impressive enough, but to gain his first legitimate victory over a former minion of his in arguably the hottest contested battle of the night is certainly worthy of recognition, and a massive thumbs up.

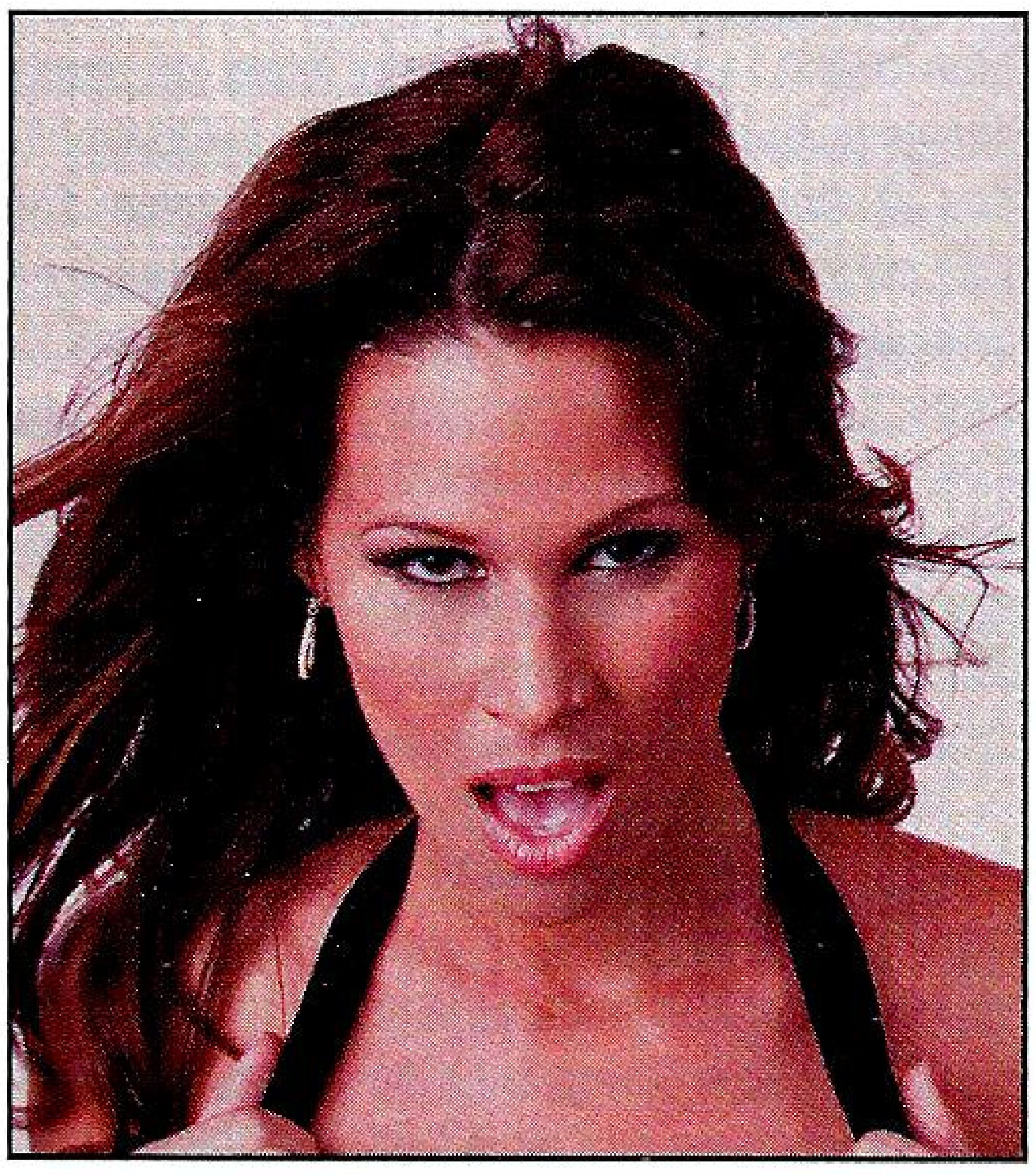
Thumbs Up to Booker T. Every chance he gets, Booker T is stalking Robert Roode and inflicting some sort of punishment on the guy, and that's exactly what fans expect to see from a man whose family was wronged. Unfortunately, Booker's efforts haven't translated into victories in the ring, yet it appears as if that's secondary to the Houston native. Rest assured, once Booker feels he's gotten his pound of flesh for the injustice perpetrated against Sharmell, he'll move on to bigger and better things—like chasing down the TNA World championship.

THUMBS DOWN

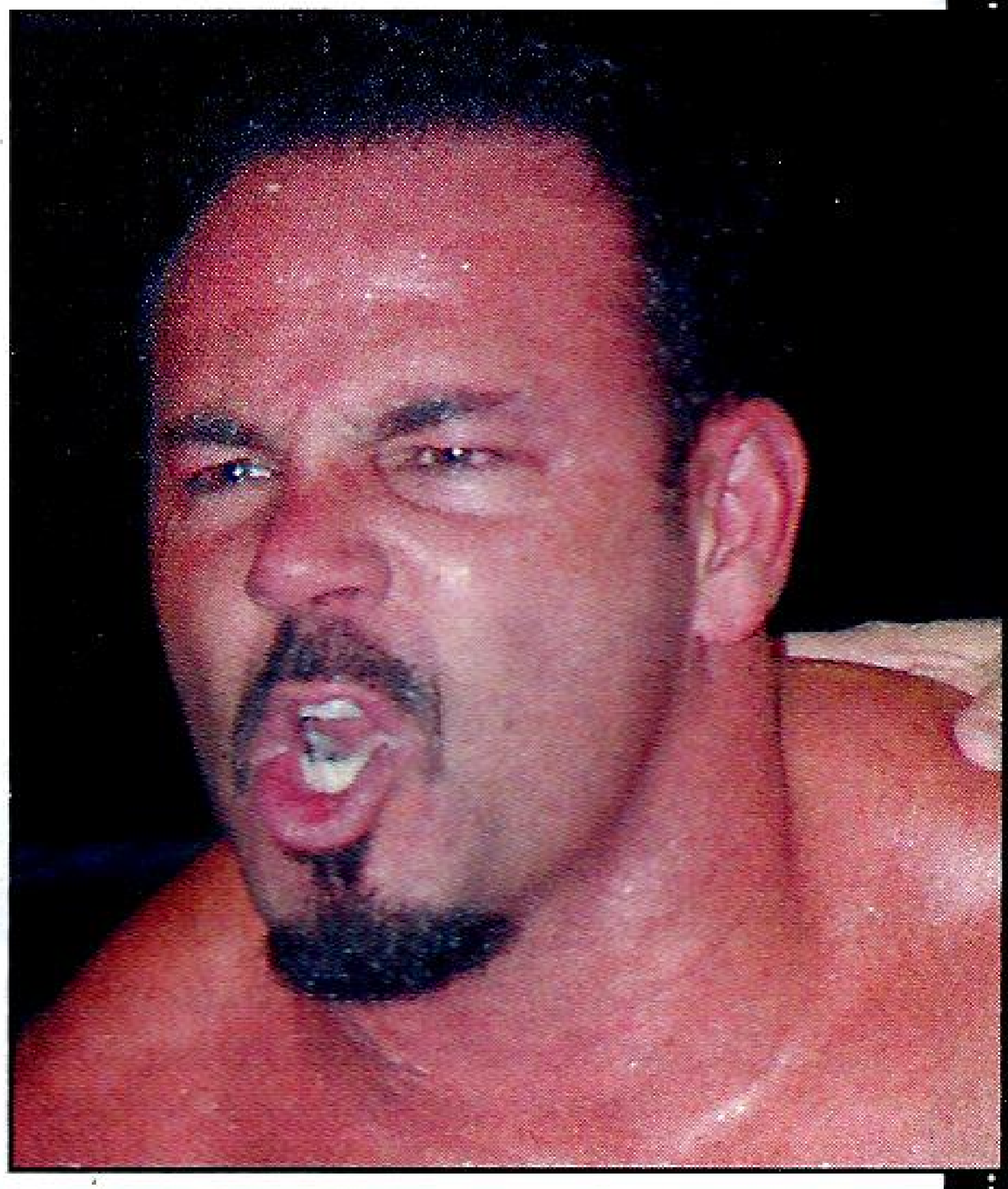


Thumbs Down to Finlay. It's hard to kick a guy when he's down, but in the case of Finlay, it may be appropriate just this once. After the tremendous amount of punishment and humiliation with which JBL tormented Finlay's son Hornswoggle going into WrestleMania 24, it only seemed natural the "Belfast Bruiser" would seek revenge. Unfortunately for both father and son, Finlay was soundly defeated at 'Mania and JBL walked away all the smugger.

Thumbs Down to Santino Marella. If there's one person not doing anything to advance the reputation of the European gentleman, it's Raw's Santino Marella. Being rebuffed by a beautiful woman generally makes a man want to better himself to improve his chances, but Marella saw his ex-girlfriend Maria's newfound independence as a reason to revert to caveman status, going so far as to sabotage her apparent victory at WrestleMania 24. Add to that a slew of derogatory comments toward women and the occasional Diva-man-handling and Marella should be getting a different finger from the fans. But, a thumb will do in this instance.



Thumbs Down to Karen Angle. There's a time and place to air one's dirty laundry, and the middle of a TNA ring is *probably* not the place to do it. Don't tell that to Karen Angle though, as she has tended to use as much of the *Impact* air time she could commandeer to let fans into the private life of the Angle family in ways that, quite frankly, no one ever expected—or wanted—to see. Karen would best be served by leaving the family issues at home and letting her husband focus on wrestling, rather than her six-sided psychotherapy sessions.



Thumbs Down to Chavo Guerrero. There are literally millions of things a person can do when given eight seconds. If you can stay on a bucking bronco for eight seconds, you're considered a success. Sporting events can be won or lost in the final eight to 10 seconds of the game. Or, if you're Chavo Guerrero Jr., you can go from decorated ECW champion to simply a dazed runner-up, suddenly 10 pounds lighter due to a severe loss of gold. Seriously, Chavo—eight seconds?! It took longer to sit down and write and proofread this last sentence than Chavo's entire WrestleMania 24 experience lasted.

[POINT:]

SMACKDOWN WILL SUCCEED ON MYNETWORKTV

BY HARRY BURKETT

WHEN WWE ANNOUNCED that Smackdown would be moving from the CW Television Network to MyNetworkTV, which has been around for less than two years, it seemed like a major step down. That was my initial reaction at least, but after taking a closer look at MyNetworkTV, I changed my mind.

Smackdown's original home network, UPN (owned by Viacom's CBS Networks), and the WB (co-owned by Time Warner and Tribune Broadcasting) merged to form the CW (the "C" stood for CBS and the "W" stood for Warner) in September 2006. Both UPN and WB affiliates existed in most markets, so CW executives tended to cut deals with the owners of the stronger stations.

Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, which owned a large number of former UPN affiliates under its Fox Television Stations Group banner, opted to unite its stations with a number of other former UPN and WB affiliates to create a new network. News Corp executives chose the name "MyNetworkTV," hoping to establish synergy with its networking website, MySpace. MyNetworkTV covers about 96 percent of the United States, a much higher percentage than UPN covered when Smackdown premiered back in 1999.

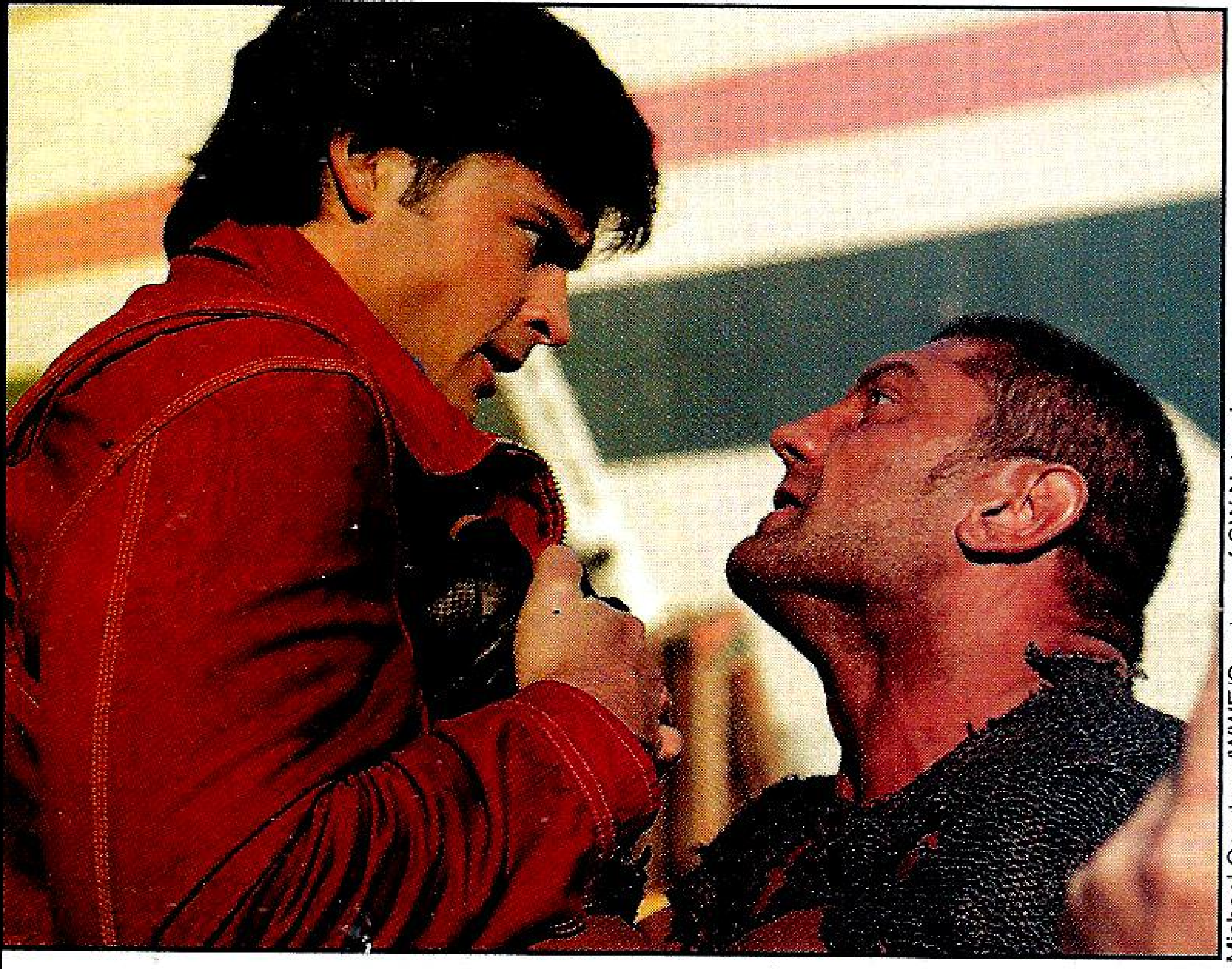
Smackdown will be MyNetworkTV's signature program, which will give WWE a tremendous amount of leverage. For example, Smackdown stands a real chance of getting out of its Friday deathslot, which is traditionally known as a night where shows go to get buried. Smackdown could provide the perfect lead-in for the Sci Fi Channel's ECW on Tuesday nights, it could definitely thrive on Wednesday nights, or it could return to its original night—Thursday—and take a crack at humiliating TNA's *Impact*, which airs from 9 to 11 p.m. Eastern on Spike TV.

Expect MyNetworkTV to hype the heck out of the blue brand, and watch for the stars of reality shows such as *Paradise Hotel* and *Jail* to be sitting at ringside for plenty of Smackdowns. The CW already seemed to be de-emphasizing Smackdown in favor of more upscale programming (how many times have wrestling fans heard that one?) such as *America's Next Top Model* and *Smallville*. Personally, I find it insulting that the CW spends more time promoting *Pussycat Dolls Presents: Girlicious* and *Farmer Wants A Wife* than Smackdown.

Finally, don't underestimate the synergistic possibilities between WWE and Fox. The Fox Broadcasting Network, in terms of demographics and tone, has long seemed to be a perfect fit for WWE. Something tells me the occasional WWE special on Fox would do a lot better than *Saturday Night's Main Event* on NBC.

After Smackdown airs its final episode on the CW on September 12, 2008, everyone associated with WWE should be very enthusiastic about the new relationship with MyNetworkTV.

***Harry Burkett is a senior writer for* THE WRESTLER.**



Michael Courtney/WWE/Courtesy of CW Network

Though the hit CW show *Smallville* invited Smackdown stars Batista (pictured, against Tom Welling as Clark Kent), Kane, and Ashley Massaro on separate occasions, Senior Writer Harry Burkett thinks being the big fish in MyNetworkTV's small pond could get Smackdown out of its Friday night time-slot rut.

COUNTERPOINT:

SMACKDOWN WILL FAIL ON MYNETWORKTV

BY LIZ HUNTER

HOW CAN ANYONE suggest that Smackdown leaving the CW for MyNetworkTV is a good thing? Smackdown has a nine-year history with the CW and its predecessor, UPN. Viewers are familiar with the CW. They watch *Everybody Hates Chris* and *Beauty And The Geek*. And *Veronica Mars* was one of my personal faves before it ended its run in May 2007 (just imagine Liz Hunter moonlighting as a private investigator).

MyNetwork-*what*? Just consider some of these gut reactions that I found posted on 411mania.com:

"Wow, what a horrible thing for WWE. Just a terrible move."

"I guess The Weather Channel wasn't an option."

"I'm pretty sure TNA is worried. Smackdown is going to a station *no one* watches."

Yet I must admit there were some optimistic posts, like this one: "A lot of people don't realize that they have MyNetworkTV. Chances are that you have it, but don't even know."

Perception is crucial among the general public, and the perception is that Smackdown is taking a massive step backward by settling for a network whose idea of prime-time programming is 15-year-old Jackie Chan movies. One could argue that ECW, as part of the Sci Fi Channel, will have higher visibility. On MyNetworkTV, Smackdown is in danger of becoming no longer the B-brand, but the C-brand, behind ECW.

It's always bad news when established programs switch networks. Such programs rarely reclaim the success they enjoyed on their original networks. Raw is the perfect example. On the other side of this argument, Harry Burkett mentions the potential synergy between WWE and Fox. When Raw moved from USA Network to The National Network (now Spike TV) in 2000, both sides touted the synergy between WWE and Viacom. Mick Foley was going to get his own detective series and WWE would begin airing monthly specials on CBS. Yeah, right. All WWE got was Mick Foley hosting *Robot Wars* and a two-point ratings drop for Raw. When that contract expired five years later, Vince McMahon eagerly returned to USA. Raw has yet to fully recover from that bad move.

Oh, and remember how *Sunday Night Heat* moved from USA to Viacom's MTV? That explains why *Heat* is now fighting extinction on wwe.com.

Even more than public perception, television viewing habits must be taken into account. When viewers tune in to the CW at 8 p.m. Eastern in late-September, Smackdown won't be there. Whatever program occupies that slot will have a shot at snagging that viewer. So will all the programs that viewer will encounter as he or she channel-surfs to find the obscure MyNetworkTV.

And what can Smackdown expect from all this? MVP guest starring on *Celebrity Exposé* and at least a half-point ratings drop.

***Liz Hunter is a contributing writer for* The Wrestler.** □

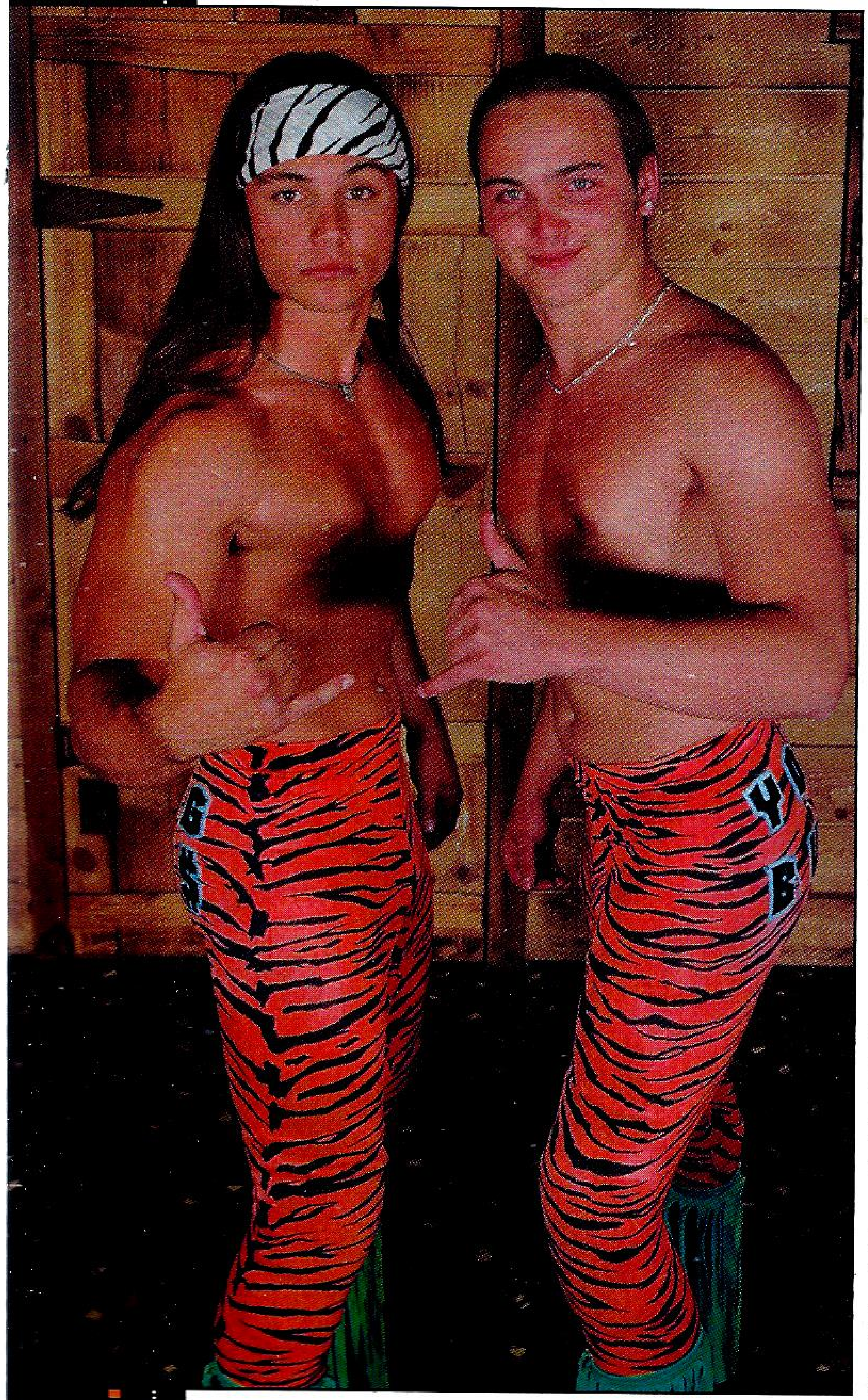
Craig Melvin/WWE/Courtesy of CW Network

Some of your favorite WWE wrestlers, like Torrie Wilson, might become a little more difficult to track down on your local MyNetworkTV. Contributing Writer Liz Hunter thinks the move from CW is a huge step back for the blue brand.

INTRODUCING

THE YOUNG BUCKS

AS YOUNG CHILDREN watching the WWF each week with their family, "Slick" Nick and Matt "Mr. Instant Replay" Jackson thought Marty Jannetty and Shawn Michaels were basically gods. Sent to them from the heavens above, The Rockers were everything the Jacksons loved about professional wrestling. They adored Michaels' ability to steal the show, Jannetty's ability to defy gravity, and the duo's risk-taking dives and complete repertoire of synchronized moves.



Just imagine the Jacksons' excitement a few years later when—as the NWA's Young Bucks—the boys teamed up with Jannetty for the first time.

"We've done six-man tag matches together that were absolutely incredible five-star matches," said Jannetty when asked about the young cruiserweight team. "I felt honored to work with them, to take them under my wing and help them reach the top, where they belong. Before I came along, they were putting on incredible matches. But with the little bit of guidance I provided, they are now beyond what I'd call 'showstoppers.' The rest of the tag team world should just step aside, because these guys need to pass on through to the top."

Growing up an hour north of Los Angeles in the dessert of Hesperia, California, 23-year-old Matt and 18-year-old Nick have stayed true to their vision of becoming one of the great tag teams in an era when tag team wrestling actually seems forgotten. "I definitely enjoy the high-flying matchups. And tag team wrestling can be what that is all about. I love it. It's been a crazy ride, but definitely a dream from the start," said Nick Jackson (who actually began his wrestling training at an age where most are just trying to get through middle school). "Matt and I grew up watching wrestling, and when we saw The Rockers, we knew we had to get into all this somehow."

Jannetty's enthusiastic assessment aside, there are many in the industry who feel The Young Bucks could one day be breakout stars. The Bucks have dedicated their entire careers to entertaining and inspiring the fans, just as Jannetty and Michaels once did for them. "I love tag team wrestling the best, no doubt," said Matt. "I wish more promotions placed an emphasis on it. And the influence of Marty has really helped us a lot as far as making our matches flow. His whole wrestling style—with the quick tags, the double-team moves, and the old school 'Rocker' wrestling—lends itself so well to what Nick and I try to do out there. Unfortunately, tag team wrestling has become a lost art, but we're really trying to make it exciting again."

After starting their training as teenagers with the American Wild Child (who also trained Human Tornado), the brothers were seemingly on their way. For the last 2½ years, the Jacksons ran their own promotion, High Risk Wrestling, before signing on with the NWA. They got the name Young Bucks quite by accident. When they were signed to compete on one of their first cards, a few of the older vet-

BY BRADY HICKS

PHOTOS BY SHANE M. KIDDER/NWA PRO

erans at the show were searching for a name to call them. "They didn't even know our names. All they had to go off of is that we were young," said Matt. "So the name Young Bucks started. Then the promoters started putting our name on flyers and advertisements for shows, and the next thing we knew, it took off."

The Jackson brothers have made a few stops along the way, including a tryout match with WWE during a recent West Coast swing by the company. Before Raw and Smackdown tapings, the brothers were given the chance to show what they could do in the ring as several agents watched. While competing at the Pro Wrestling Guerrilla's Battle of Los Angeles show, the brothers were invited to embark on an upcoming tour of the Dragon Gate promotion in Japan. Matt and Nick are hoping to learn from many of Ultimo Dragon's former Toryumon Gym trainees, as well as wrestlers from Ring of Honor and several other top independent promotions that will be on the tour.

Matt and Nick have garnered a lot of praise from their peers for how they handle themselves both inside and outside of the ring, once prompting Sean Waltman to say of them, "They're good kids. They don't drink. They don't curse. They don't do drugs. They're both pretty cool guys. Oh, and they're also a heck of a team."

Ironically, kind words by veterans such as Jannetty and Waltman have done nothing to inflate The Young Bucks' egos. If anything, their words only help to make the brothers more humble. "It's actually all been really inspiring," concluded Nick. "All these comparisons to The Rockers and all the great things they were able to pull off in the ring are a little crazy. I know that I always try to be more innovative, but only because I'm not looking to be known as a Shawn Michaels or Marty Jannetty ripoff."

Still, the biggest endorsement of The Young Bucks comes from their mentor, Jannetty. "I don't know what Nick is talking about," he said. "The Young Bucks are the best tag team in wrestling today. They're more like The Rockers than anyone I've ever seen. They do beautiful things Shawn and I used to wish we could do. It's today's physical style with yesterday's psychology. In other words, these kids, The Young Bucks, are a piece of artistic perfection." ☐

Of all their skills, both veteran wrestlers and newcomers have been most impressed with Matt and Nick Jacksons' teamwork and timing. It's no wonder. The Young Bucks patterned their careers after The Rockers, Shawn Michaels and Marty Jannetty.

Brothers Nick and Matt Jackson have been perfecting their teamwork since their adolescent days, when they idolized The Rockers. The Young Bucks are now one of NWA's top tandems—and they aren't in the game for singles glory

WORKIN' STIFF

BY AL CASTLE

WHEN I ATTENDED my first WrestleMania at the age of 16, the trip entailed no more than a half hour-train ride from my home in Queens to Penn Station in midtown Manhattan. Just upstairs from the station was Madison Square Garden, where I witnessed Shawn Michaels and Razor Ramon revolutionize the wrestling world with some help from a ladder.

And just as WWE's annual mega event has increased in scope, cost, and complexity, so have the seven other WrestleMania trips that I've taken since 1994. There was the torturous bus trip to Boston, the cross-country flight to Seattle, and the 12-hour car ride to Chicago.

But the journey I began on the last weekend of March 2008 was unlike any other I have ever been on or likely ever will encounter again.

Roderick Strong drives his knee into the small of CIMA's back during Ring of Honor's "Dragon Gate Challenge" in Orlando. Both ROH and TNA were able to benefit from the huge crowd of wrestling fans drawn to the city by WrestleMania 24.

Friday, March 28, 2008: My weekend begins at the Orlando Recreational Complex, where I am greeted outside with a big embrace by Ring of Honor owner Cary Silkin. For four of the past five years, ROH has run shows in the host city of WrestleMania to help expose the product to fans converging there for the big weekend.

From a purely athletic standpoint, the wrestling action I would see on this night—ROH's first ever show in Orlando—would far eclipse anything I would see the rest of the weekend.

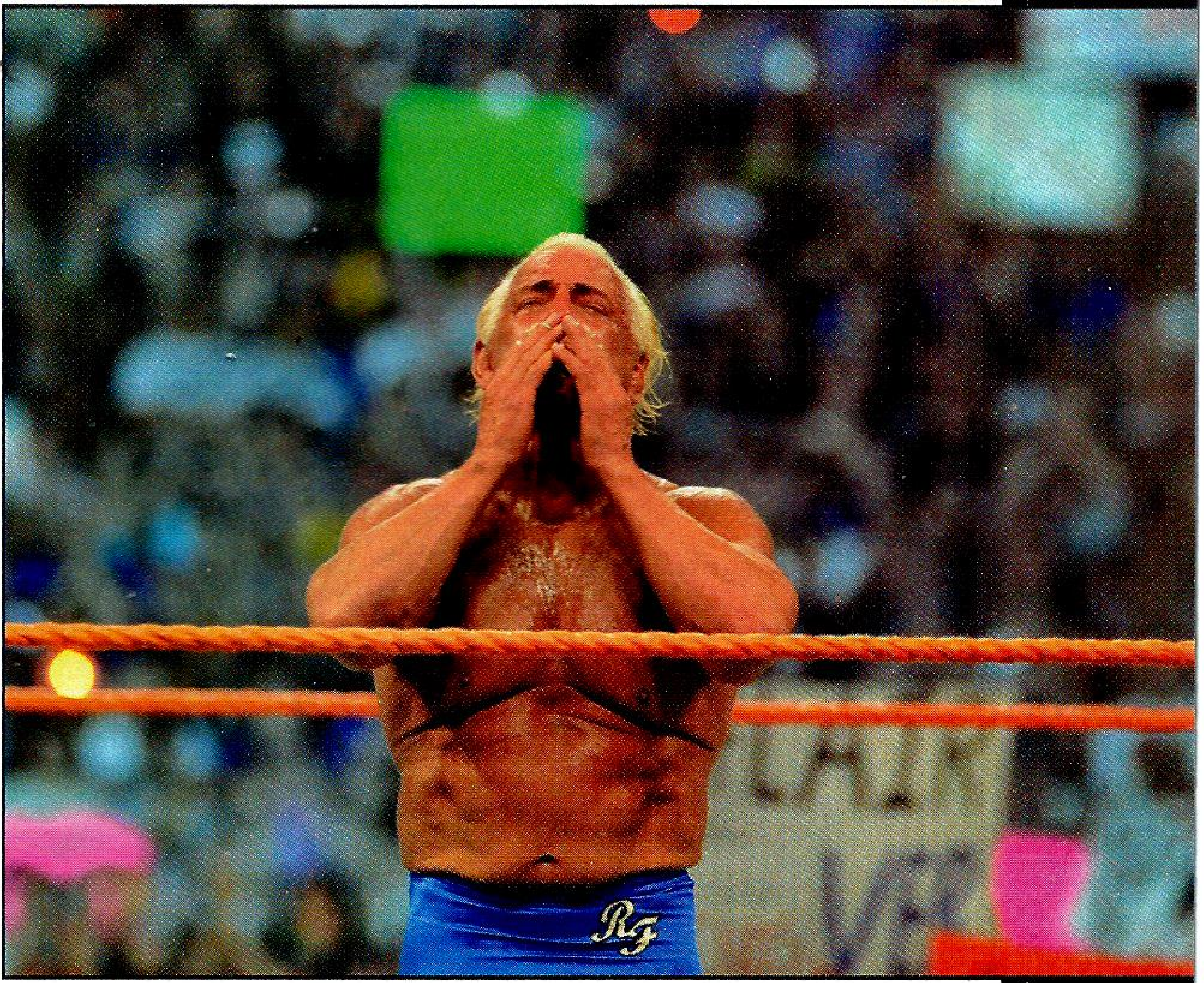
On tap for the night is ROH's annual "Dragon Gate Challenge," where stars from the Japanese promotion take on ROH wrestlers in a series of tag team matches. After the show, I chat with Mark and Jay Briscoe. They tell me they are thrilled to be part of the historic weekend in Orlando, and ROH's involvement was further evidence that, for the first time since the days of WCW and ECW, there is once again a "Big Three" in pro wrestling.

Saturday: March 29, 2008: My first glimpse at the madness of WrestleMania takes place at the DoubleTree Hotel across the street from Universal Studios, where a WWE merchandise stand features a steady stream of wrestling fans paying top dollar for anything with a WrestleMania 24 logo on it. A line of fans who arrived hours early for a 1 p.m. autograph signing by Montel Vontavious Porter wraps around the hotel.

After several hours of driving around Orlando with my wife looking for an outfit for her to wear at the WWE Hall of Fame ceremony later in the evening, I arrive nearly two hours late to the last of TNA's three events taking place at the Impact Zone in Universal Studios. I miss all the matches, but am ushered into the backstage area, where I meet up with two representatives from Midway who are in Orlando to promote TNA's upcoming video game release. They introduce me to avid gamer A.J. Styles, who raves about the game—and about the biggest wrestling weekend in Orlando history. "The best part is that you see a lot of friends that you haven't seen in a while that wrestle for WWE or ROH," Styles said. "A lot of people think we're the biggest enemies, but we're really all rooting for each other."

The shopping trip for ladies' formal wear would be in vain, because I run so late at the TNA show that I have no time to stop by my hotel room to change into my suit. Much to my embarrassment, I show up to WWE's Hall of

Fame ceremony in an Ivan Drago T-shirt and plaid shorts. My unease quickly wears off after I take my seat near Billy Kidman, and soak in nearly five hours of wrestling's greatest stars trading war stories. Even at the four-hour mark, fans are more than attentive for the night's main event—Ric Flair's induction. For more than an hour, he offers lots of thank-yous, and some of the most hilarious wrestling tales ever told, including that of the $30,000 England bar tab. I wouldn't have minded if Flair went all night—and I'm sure he could've.



The history of WrestleMania has hundreds of memorable moments, with each year owning its own highlight. For the 24th installment of the event, Ric Flair's tearful departure will undoubtedly be remembered as 'Mania 24's most unforgettable moment.

Sunday March 30, 2008: In an open field across the street from the stadium, the final stop of the annual WrestleMania Fan Axxess Tour is in full swing, with rock band Rev Theory performing a free concert for fans. Thousands mill around, getting temporary WWE tattoos, playing video games, and buying the official WrestleMania program.

I head inside the Citrus Bowl around 5 p.m. and get my first glimpse of the setup. Under an overcast sky and without any of the colorful lights on, I am a bit underwhelmed. But once the show kicks off at 7 p.m., I realize the benefits of choosing an outdoor stadium. Fireworks shoot off, two fighter planes fly by, and 74,000 fans erupt in excitement under the drizzling gray skies. For the next four hours, I would be witness to one of the grandest wrestling events of our time.

You all know what happened at WrestleMania. Ten matches took place—some good, some ... not so much. But at the end of the night, there is one lasting image in my mind—Shawn Michaels mouthing the words, "I'm sorry, I love you" before ending the most storied career the wrestling universe has ever seen.

Monday March 31: After a brief break from all things wrestling, I am back at the Amway Arena around 7:30 p.m. for Monday Night Raw. Each year, fans anticipate a monumental episode of Raw coming on the heels of WrestleMania, and very often they are let down. They were not let down on this night.

Ric Flair's final farewell tribute ceremony—with nearly the entire WWE locker room honoring the greatest performer in their industry's history—was not only a highlight of the weekend, but also a highlight in the annals of wrestling history. With a lump in my throat, I cheered as hard as I could as the "Nature Boy" took his final bow.

The *"Whoooooos!"* were audible along the I-4 as I headed back to my hotel.

Tuesday, April 1: After watching the WWE product on the biggest stage of them all two days earlier, I decide to wrap up my historic wrestling venture by watching it on the smallest. An hour-and-a-half drive takes me to the city of New Port Richey, where I find the Bourbon Street Night Club. The marquee outside reads "FCW Wrestling Tonight."

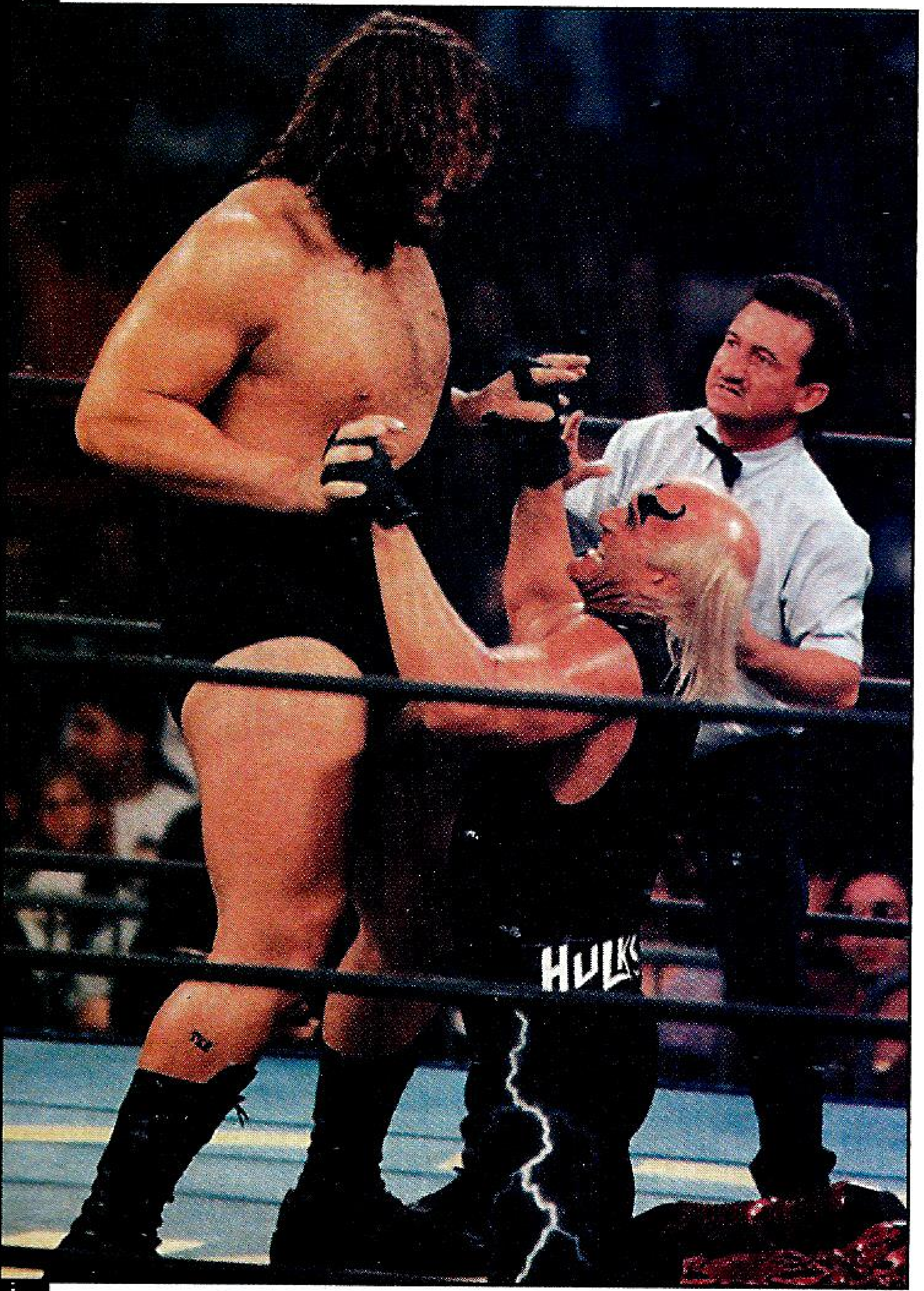
Florida Championship Wrestling is the only official WWE developmental territory, and each Tuesday night, the stars of tomorrow wrestle before a few dozen fans inside a ring set up on a small dance floor.

As I sip dollar drafts and watch up-and-comers such as Sheamus O'Shaunessy and Heath Miller, I wonder who among these young men and women will go on to headline WrestleMania one day. Whoever it may be, I hope to see them there in person. □

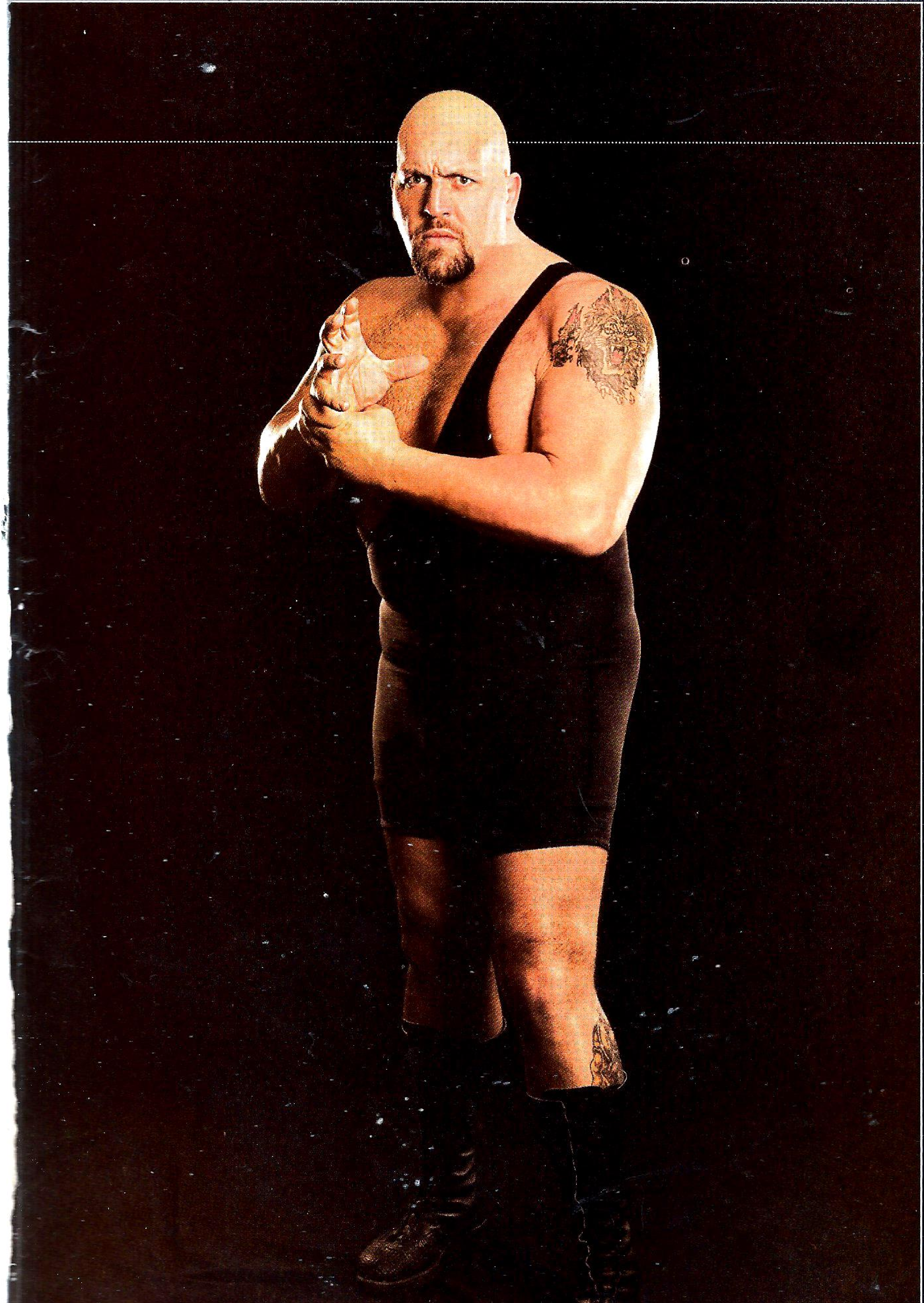
SPOTLIGHT ON . . .

THE BIG SHOW

WHEN THE MAN considered by many to be the best wrestler ever calls you "the best big man I've ever worked with," you have to feel good about yourself ... The Big Show received that supreme compliment from Ric Flair during the "Nature Boy's" WWE Hall of Fame induction speech ... Paul Wight's wrestling career began 14 years ago after being introduced to Hulk Hogan by actor Danny Bonaduce ... Initially trained at Larry Sharpe's Monster Factory before enrolling at the WCW Power Plant in 1995 ... and made his debut for the company as The Giant in July '95 at Bash at the Beach ... Joined Kevin Sullivan's Dungeon of Doom faction ... Immediately targeted Hogan and beat him by disqualification at Halloween Havoc in October '95, in his first official match ... Defeated Ric Flair on the April 22, 1996, episode of *Nitro* to capture the WCW World title ... Lost the belt to Hogan in September at Hog Wild after interference from Hogan's new NWO cohorts ... Joined the NWO himself, less than a month later, after he was bribed by Ted DiBiase ... Was offered a title match against Hogan, but was kicked out of the group for accepting it ... The match with Hogan, at Souled Out in January 1998, ended in a no-contest after the NWO interfered ... Aligned with Sting and Lex Luger to battle his former allies ... Luger and The Giant captured the WCW tag team title after defeating the NWO's Scott Hall and Kevin Nash at SuperBrawl VII on February 23, 1997 ... Hall and Nash regained the belts on *Nitro* the next evening ... Teamed with Luger to defeat Hogan and Dennis Rodman at Bash at the Beach in July 1997 ... Pinned Randy Savage at Road Wild a month later ... Was eliminated by Hogan during a 60-man battle royal at World War III in November '97... Engaged in a verbal war with Nash, who for a while refused to wrestle him ... Their match finally came at Souled Out in January '98, with Nash prevailing ... Teamed with Sting to win the WCW World tag title from Hall and Nash at Slamboree on May 17, 1998 ... Aligned with Nash in the NWO Wolfpac faction ... After the team split, Sting defeated The Giant at the Great American Bash in July to gain control of the tag title ... Teamed with Hall to beat Sting and Kevin Nash on July 20, 1998, to capture the tag championship for a third time ... Signed a 10-year contract with the WWF in February 1999 ... Debuted for the WWF, using his given name, at St. Valentine's Day Massacre ... Attacked "Stone-Cold" Steve Austin during a steel cage match, but inadvertently helped him win the contest ... Soon was renamed "The Big Show" ... Became Mr. McMahon's personal bodyguard ... Lost to Mankind by disqualification at WrestleMania XV ... Defeated by Mankind again at Backlash, this time in a "Boiler Room Brawl" ... Aligned with Mankind, Test, and Shane McMahon to form The Union ... They battled The Undertaker's Corporate Ministry with varying degrees of success ... Teamed with Undertaker to defeat reigning WWF World tag team champs Kane and X-Pac at



October 1995: In his first professional match, The Giant uses his superior power to bring "Hollywood" Hulk Hogan to his knees. The Giant would leave Halloween Havoc with Hogan's WCW World title that night, but would return the strap a week later due to a technicality.



THE BIG SHOW

December 1996: The Giant whips future tag team partner and NWO Wolfpac member Lex Luger into the ringpost. The on-again/off-again teammates would go on to defeat Hollywood Hogan and Dennis Rodman a year later at Bash at the Beach.

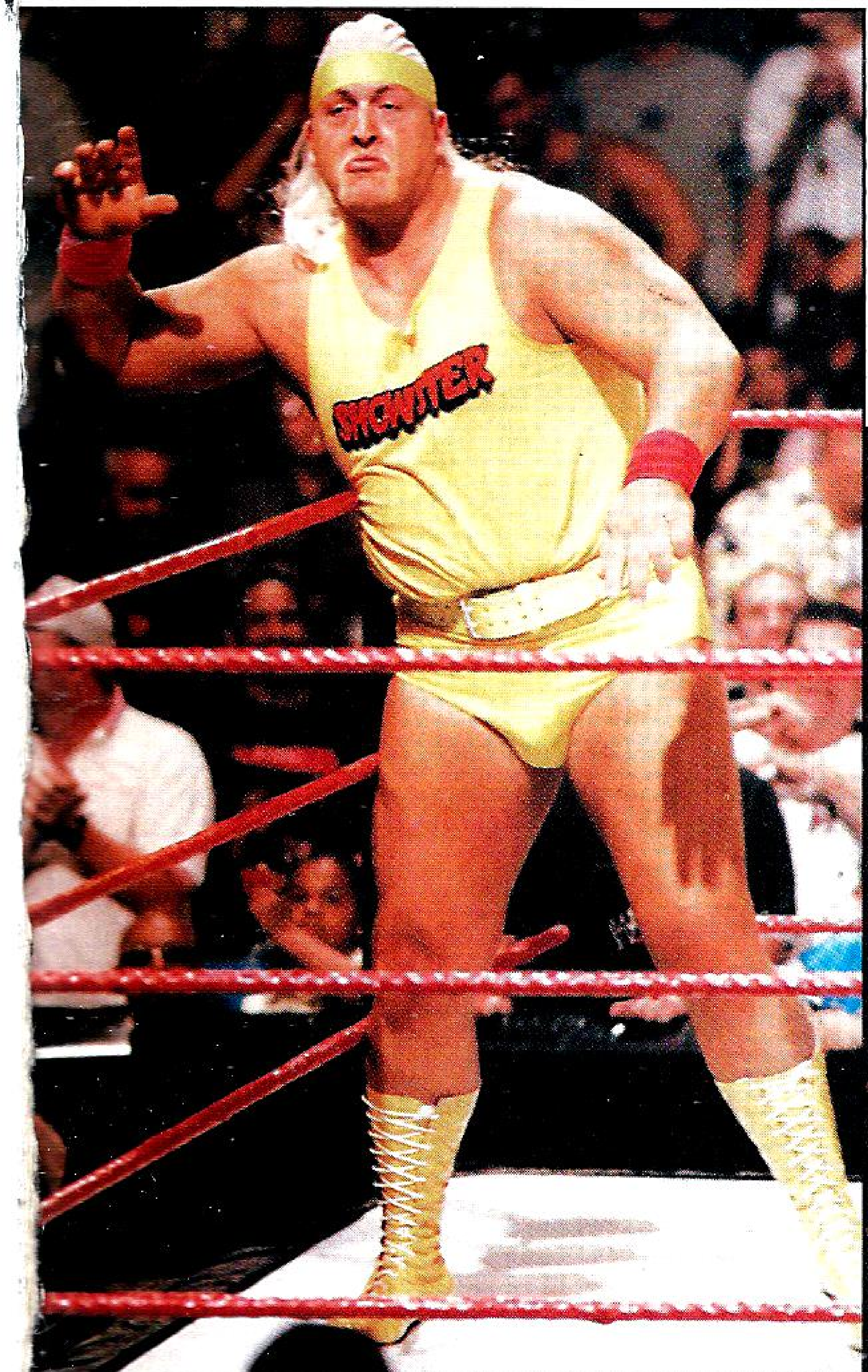
June 1998: The Giant prepares to lower an elbow on Sting. A few weeks earlier, they would share the WCW World tag team title. Sting was to get the ultimate revenge by pinning The Giant at the Great American Bash.

SummerSlam on August 22, 1999 ... Show was inserted into the November 14, 1999, triple threat match including World champion The Rock and Triple-H at Survivor Series, replacing the injured Austin ... Pinned Triple-H to win The Rock's title ... Lost the title to Triple-H on the January 3 Raw ... Was the last man eliminated in a photo finish at the 2000 Royal Rumble ... After a replay revealed that Show was the rightful winner, he was given a chance to steal Rock's WrestleMania XVI title shot at No Way Out ... Defeated Rock with the help of Shane McMahon ... The 'Mania bout was eventually made into a four-way match, also involving The Rock, Mick Foley, and champion Triple-H ... Big Show was the first man eliminated ... Defeated Kurt Angle at April's Backlash, while dressed as Hulk

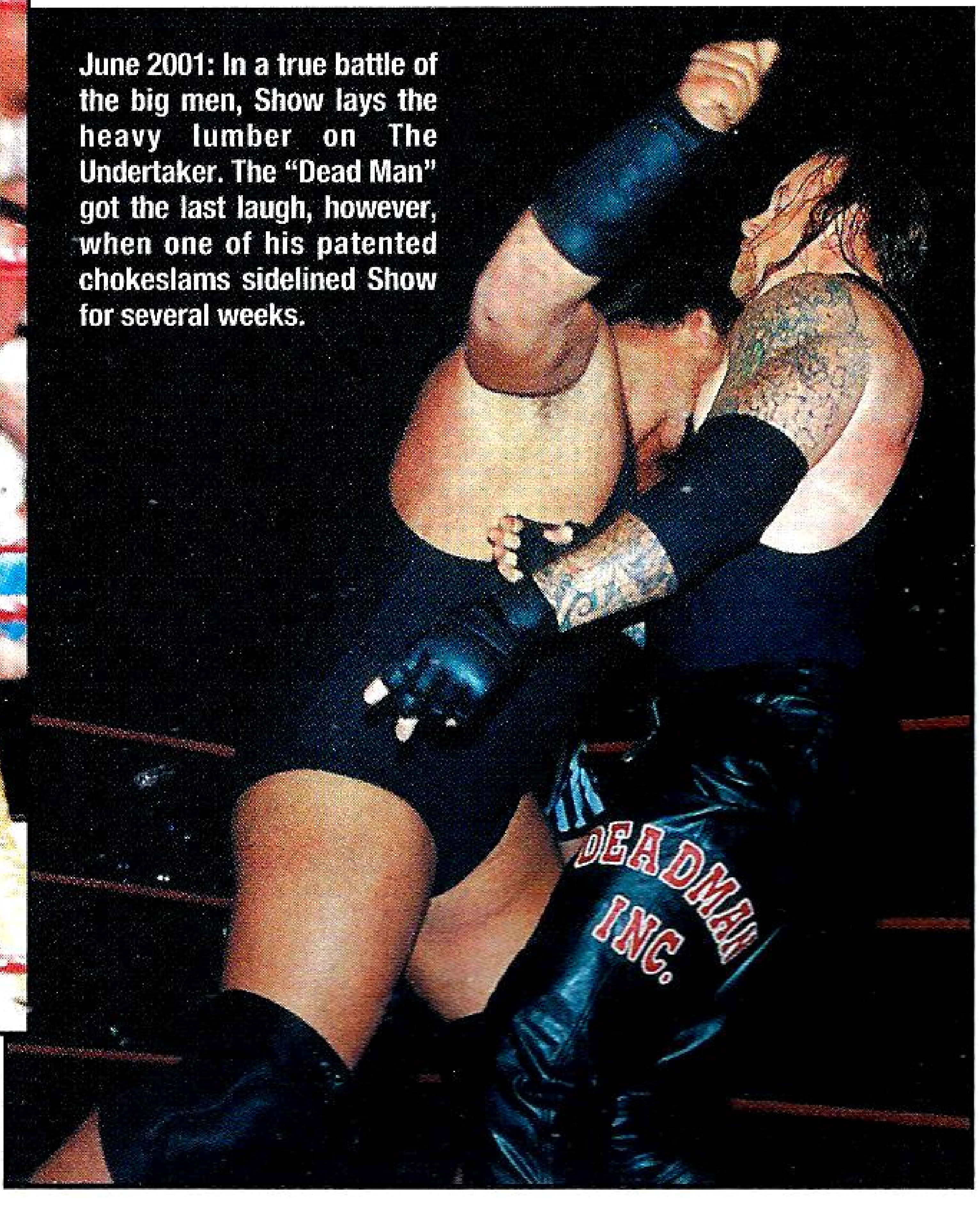
March 1999: The Big Show launches a big right hand at Mankind. Big Show and Mick Foley would trade victories over the course of a protected feud that included a "Boiler Room Brawl" at Backlash '99.

February 2000: Shane McMahon shields himself behind the protective arm of The Big Show. Just months before joining Show and Mankind to fight The Undertaker's Corporate Ministry faction, Shane O'Mac and Show were at each other's throats.

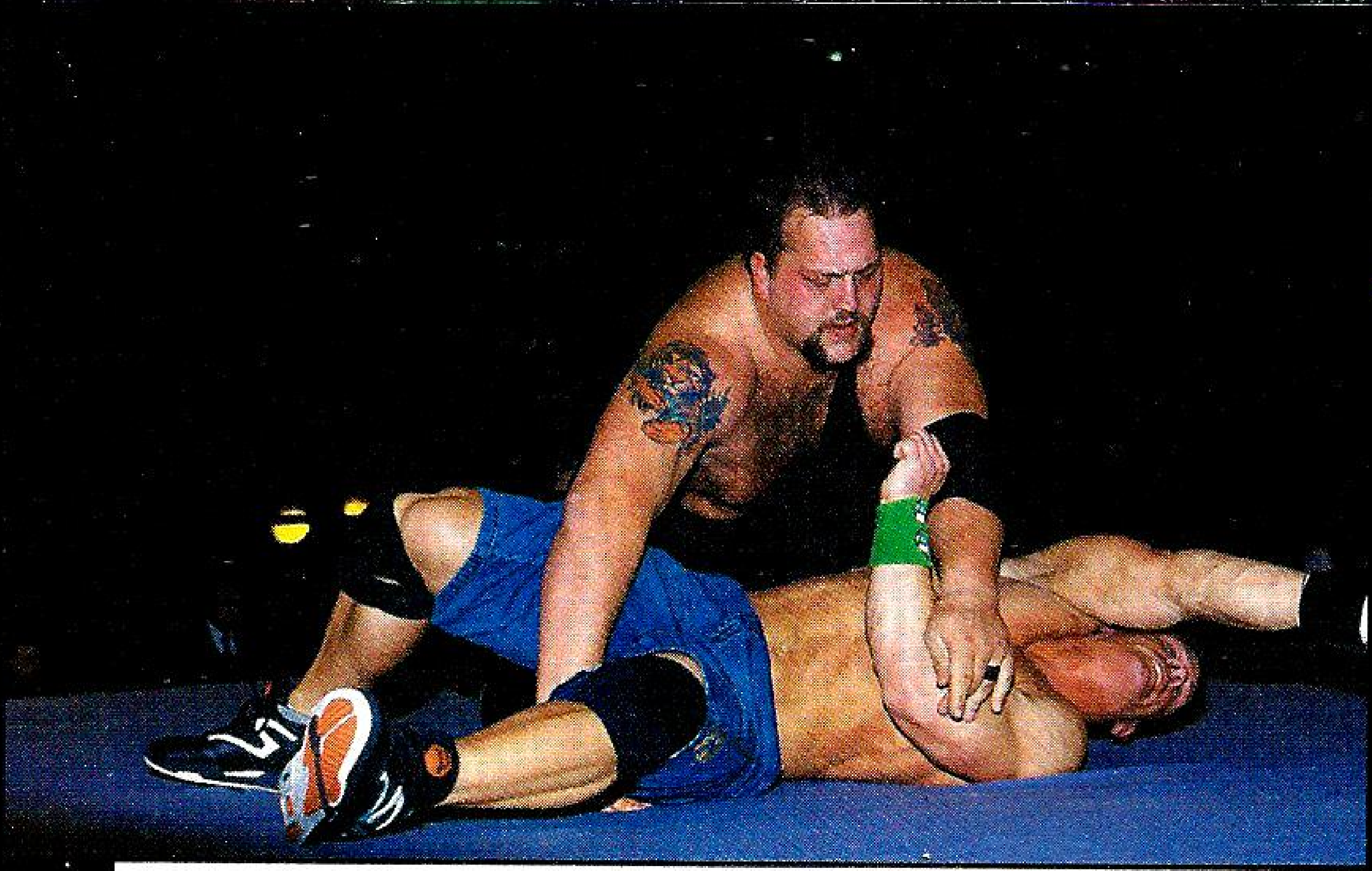
Hogan ... Was beaten a month later by Shane McMahon in a falls-count-anywhere match at Judgment Day, following the interference of several wrestlers ... Show would be out of action for two months ... Attacked The Undertaker upon his return, siding with Shane McMahon in his faction, The Conspiracy ... Was chokeslammed through a table by 'Taker, leading to another disappearance from the WWF ... Returned early in 2001, entering and failing to win the Royal Rumble ... Challenged Raven for the hardcore belt in a triple threat match at WrestleMania X-7 ... Kane won the bout and the title ... Lost to Shane McMahon in a "Last Man Standing" match at Backlash in April after Test interfered ... Aligned with Team WWF to take on the WCW/ECW Alliance, even competing in the main event Survivor Series bout between the two ... Was selected by Raw GM Ric Flair in the first ever WWE draft ... Had a hard time finding his niche in Raw and was traded to Smackdown near the end of 2002 ... Immediately, Show targeted the brand's champion, Brock Lesnar ... Defeated Lesnar at Survivor Series to capture the Smackdown World title on November 17, 2002 ... A month later, at



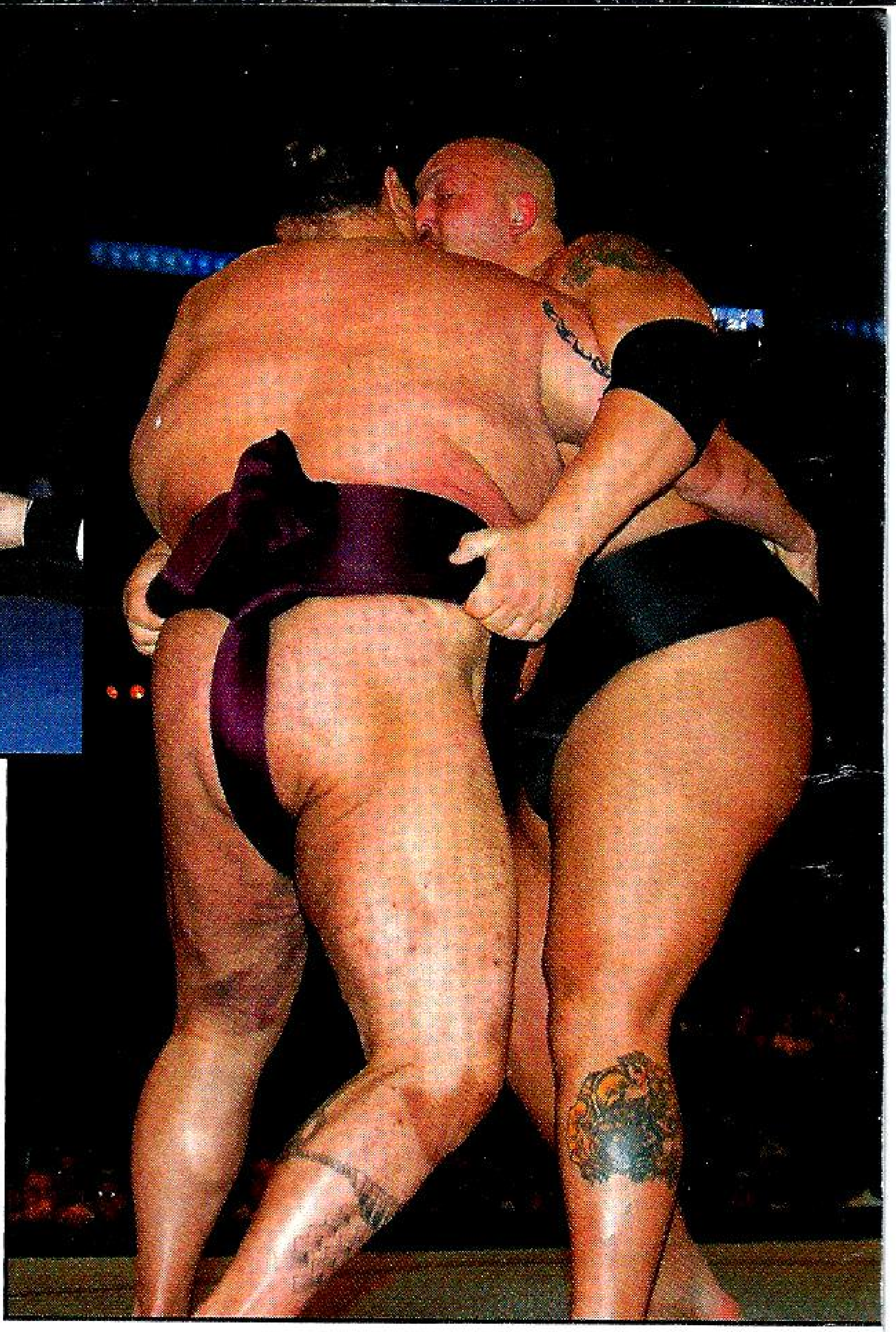
April 2000: The Big Show "hulks up" at Backlash 2000. Billed as "The Showster," Show would defeat Kurt Angle in a mid-card bout. Other Big Show parodies included "Showkishi" a play on former WWF superstar Rikishi.


DEADMAN INC.

June 2001: In a true battle of the big men, Show lays the heavy lumber on The Undertaker. The "Dead Man" got the last laugh, however, when one of his patented chokeslams sidelined Show for several weeks.

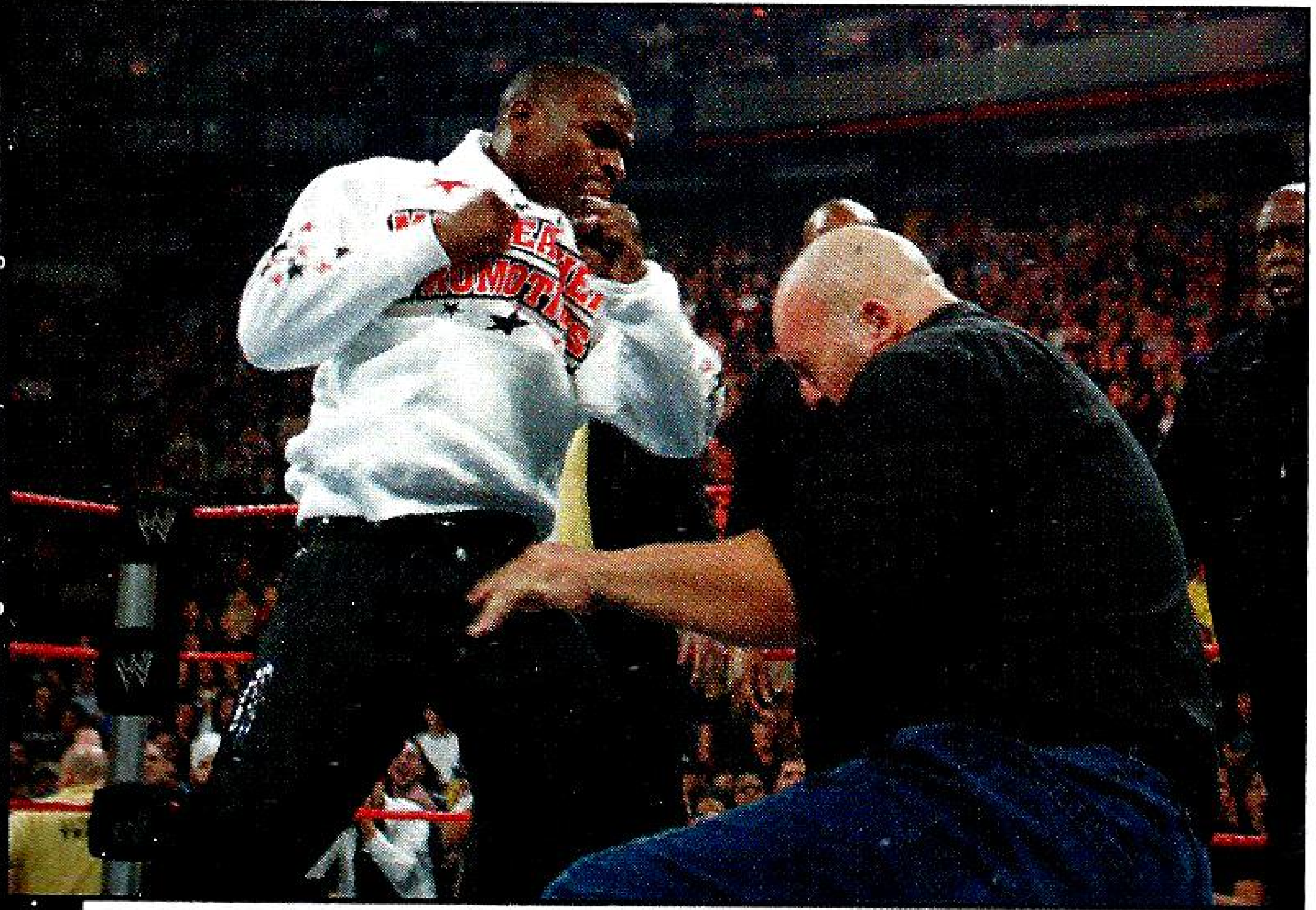


March 2004: Show goes for a pin in defense of his U.S. title at WrestleMania XX. Cena was resourceful enough not only to kick out here, but to outfight The Big Show and go home with the strap.



April 2005: At WrestleMania 21, Big Show donned a miwashi to take on Sumo legend Akebono. It was a hard-fought battle, but The Big Show went down in defeat to the former yokozuna.

Armageddon, Show would lose the belt to Kurt Angle following Lesnar's interference ... Aligned with A-Train in a losing effort against The Undertaker and Nathan Jones at WrestleMania XIX ... Attacked Rey Mysterio Jr., who was strapped to a stretcher ... This led to a stretcher match between Lesnar and Big Show at Judgment Day in May '03, which Lesnar won ... Continued feuding with the champ, as well as Mr. America (Hulk Hogan) ... Beat Eddie Guerrero for the U.S. title at No Mercy on October 19, 2003 ... Carried the U.S. title into WrestleMania XX, where he lost it to John Cena ... Threw Angle off a parking lot ledge on the April 15, 2004, episode of Smackdown ... Angle, in his capacity as general manager, suspended Show from WWE television ... Show returned in September, during an Angle-Guerrero lumberjack match ... Angle later used a tranquilizer dart on Show and shaved his head ... Big Show gained a measure of revenge by pinning Angle in a match at No Mercy ... Lost to Japan's Akebono in a Sumo match at WrestleMania 21 ... Was drafted to Raw ... Teamed with Kane at Taboo Tuesday November 1, 2005, to capture the Raw tag team title from Lance Cade and Trevor Murdoch ... Led the fight against Smackdown in a series of interbrand battles ... Feuded with Triple-H, who injured Show's hand and pinned him at New Year's Revolution ... Show and Kane beat Carlito and Chris Masters at WrestleMania 22 ... After losing the tag title to The Spirit Squad on April 3, 2006, the team disbanded and feuded ... Wrestled Kane to a no-contest at Backlash ... Defected to the ECW brand ... Had quick success, defeating Rob Van Dam for the ECW title on July 4 in Philadelphia ... Pinned Sabu at SummerSlam in an "Extreme Rules" match ... Aligned with the McMahons in a losing effort against DeGeneration X at Unforgiven in a "Hell In A Cell" match ... Pinned by Bobby Lashley for the ECW title in December to Dismember's "Elimination Chamber" match ... Went on hiatus from WWE ... His only match during his absence was a loss to Hulk Hogan at Memphis Wrestling's "Clash Of Legends" show in April 2007 ... Lost upwards of 100 pounds, finally returning to WWE at 2008's No Way Out ... Had his nose broken by welterweight boxing champion Floyd Mayweather after Show tried to attack a helpless Mysterio ... Lost his WrestleMania 24 match to Mayweather, who was aided by his entire entourage and a pair of brass knuckles ... Was still feeling great from Ric Flair's comment of the night before, and anxious to get on with his career. □



March 2008: Welterweight boxing champ Floyd "Money" Mayweather lands a combination that breaks The Big Show's nose. At WM 24, the fighter used brass knuckles to score the victory.

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Q & A

JIM CORNETTE

"I was either going to go to prison or I was going to have a heart attack"

JIM CORNETTE HAS been one of the most outspoken, influential, and well-traveled wrestling figures of the past 20 years. "The Louisville Lip" broke into the wrestling business in the mid-1970s as a teenage fan that befriended the local Louisville promoter and worked his way into a managing role on the show. Over the next three decades, Cornette would have success both on TV and in managing The Midnight Express to new heights of tag team success. Cornette also contributed as a booker and writer behind the scenes.

In 1993, Cornette joined the WWF, where, alongside Mr. Fuji, he co-managed Yokozuna to the World title. Cornette worked on and off with the WWF through 1998, both as a manager and as a member of the creative team. He also became involved with Louisville's Ohio Valley Wrestling, which he helped build into WWE's premier developmental wrestling territory at the time. There, he helped shape the careers of such future stars as John Cena, Randy Orton, and Batista.

WWE parted ways with Cornette after he slapped a wrestling student. Disenchanted with the wrestling business, Cornette kept a low profile until he received an offer to join TNA as its on-screen management director.

Cornette has been a prominent figure since wrestling's territorial days, through the Monday Night Wars, and continues to be a vibrant and dynamic force in TNA. In this very candid interview with Senior Writer Dan Murphy, Cornette gives his side of some of the most controversial moments of his career and his thoughts on how the wrestling industry has evolved through the years.

"One of the best compliments you can give a wrestler is to tell him he could wrestle a broomstick and turn it into a good match," Murphy said. "When you're interviewing Jim Cornette, you have no choice but to be the broomstick. All I had to do was introduce a topic and Jim was off on his next rant. There were some other topics I had planned to explore, but once Cornette got on a roll, I thought the best thing to do was to let him talk. Besides, it was hard enough just getting a word in."

Q: Your career began in real storybook fashion. You were taking ringside photographs, working as a ring announcer, and doing just about everything else before you got a managing opportunity from promoter Jerry Jarrett. Can you tell me a little more on how that came about?

A: I talked my mom into taking me to my first match when I was 12. I had been watching it on TV since I was nine. From the first time I watched wrestling, I was hooked. I started taking pictures when I could get a ringside seat. Then I got a 35-millimeter camera and got front-row seats and started taking better pictures. Not only did some of the wrestlers see them and like them, but Christine Jarrett, Jerry's mother and Jeff's grandmother, saw them. We had gotten to know her because she was the local Louisville promoter. Before this, she had asked me to keep track of the local television show and make sure they didn't play the wrong interviews or short her on the commercial time. Those were the days when they sold the old 8x10 black-and-white Xeroxed pictures at the souvenir stand. The color 4x6, 35-mm genuine pictures were a hit, and I started taking pictures backstage. That graduated into shooting at ringside.

By my 15th birthday, I already had a few pictures published in *Wrestling News* magazine. My stuff was being sold on the souvenir stand, which is how my mom came into play. I still wasn't old enough for a driver's license, and we lived 25 miles from the Louisville Gardens. She would sit at the picture table and push my stuff, so people got to know who she was. Years later, it fit perfectly when Jerry Jarrett wanted to make me a manager. That way, he could give me the old "Playboy" Gary Hart rich-kid routine. They knew my mom had always accompanied me to the matches since I was a little kid, so it fit.

Q: So when you started talking about Mama Cornette, the fans already knew her. They could actually put a face to the name?

A: Louisville is where I got the most heat when I first started because all the fans knew my mom, and they loved her. They were like, "How could you be such a

Photo By Lee South/TNA

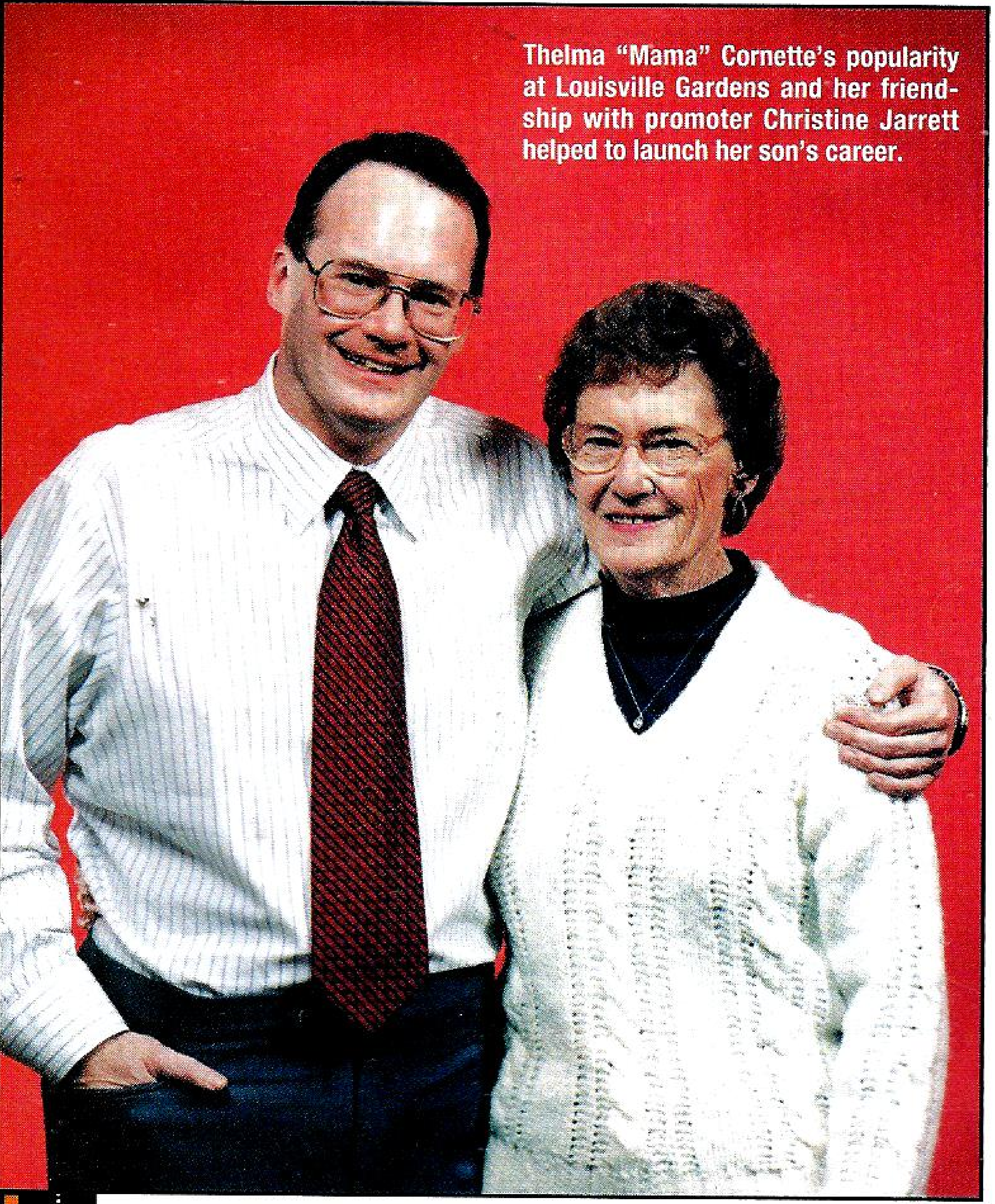
As manager of The Midnight Express (Bobby Eaton and Dennis Condrey), Jim Cornette helped create one of the NWA's most memorable feuds against The Rock 'n' Roll Express.

jerk and disappoint your mother, you no-good son-of-a-gun?" They never hated Mama Cornette in Louisville, but they hated me for turning out to be such a jerk. By the time I was 20 and started to manage, I had never been involved in the performance aspect of the business. But by time I was 17, I was going to three shows a week. I was shooting pictures for *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*, the Japanese magazines, doing the ring announcing. I somewhat understood how to lay out a television show because I was keeping track of the show in Louisville. I watched Miss Christine run the towns and sell the tickets. My mom and her became good friends. It was the coolest experience I could get in the business part of wrestling before I was even a performer. I learned from someone who had been in the business 30 years, and that really helped me when I finally got involved in the business. That's when Jerry Jarrett said, "Hell, this kid's been around six years and he does everything else. Let's see if we can make him a manager."

Q: Your first claim to fame as a manager was that you would manage different people, and they'd all fire you after just one match.

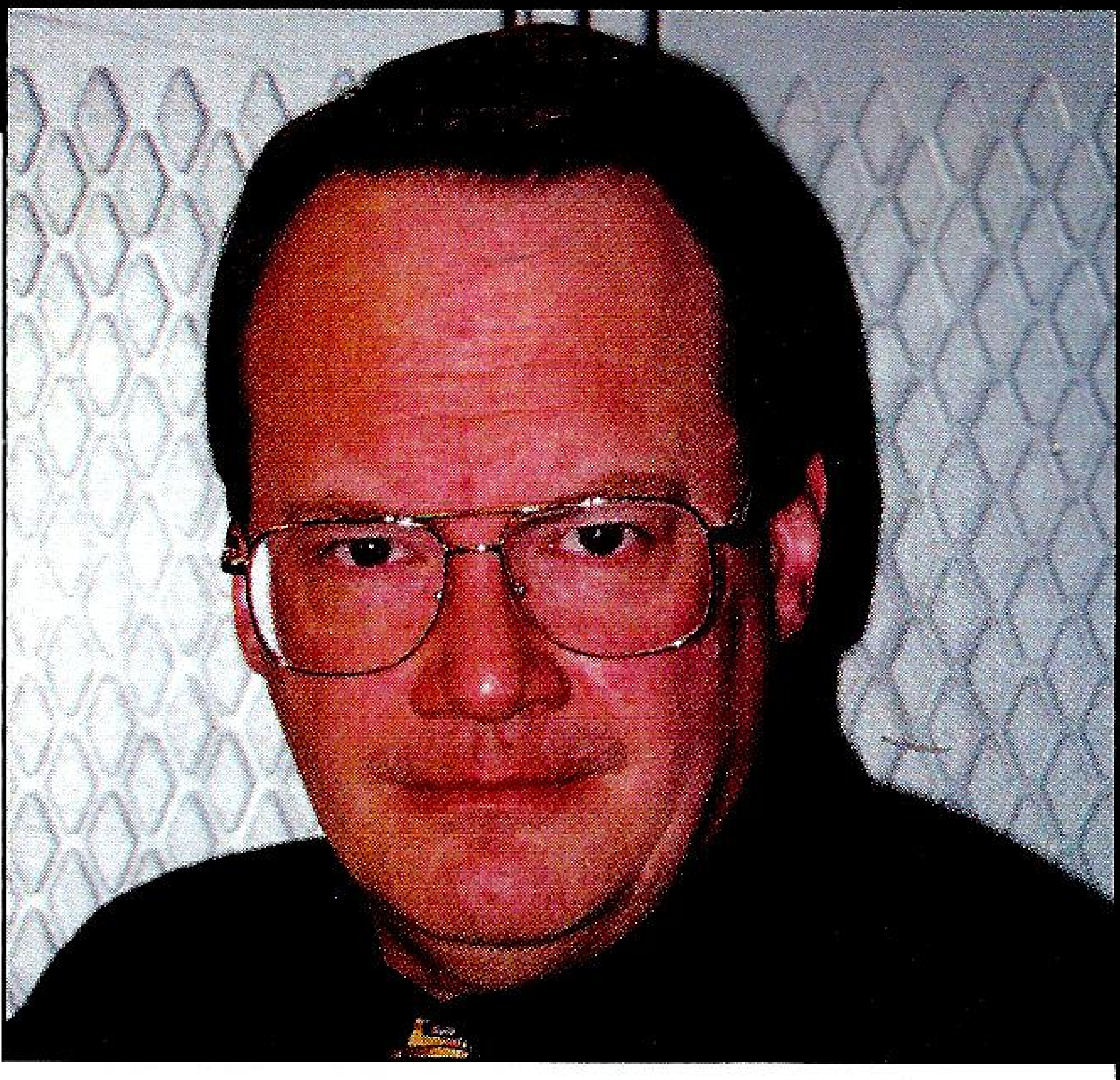
A: Jimmy Hart was the top manager, so I would do promos on TV saying, "I don't want to be like Jimmy Hart. I want to manage the good guys, Jerry Lawler, Bill Dundee, Dutch Mantell, people like this—because I'm a Cornette and I have class." And they did the reverse psychology thing. I didn't come out being a heel. I came out being a clueless teenage putz, which I was. Lance Russell would interview me, and I was a rich kid saying, "Well, I've never had a job, Lance. Mama pays for everything. Why should I work?"

I got heat by being this clueless, rich idiot who wanted to sign up these big wrestling stars. Lawler would come out and make fun of me. Dundee turned me down. Finally, Dutch took me up on it. During the official contract signing a week later, after I had screwed up his match against Lawler, he tore up our picture and tore up the contract and



Thelma "Mama" Cornette's popularity at Louisville Gardens and her friendship with promoter Christine Jarrett helped to launch her son's career.

> **"Louisville is where I got the most heat when I first started because all the fans knew my mom and they loved her. They were like, 'How could you be such a jerk and disappoint your mother, you no-good son-of-a-gun?'"**



fired me. It was a classic picture: "Dirty" Dutch Mantell, the rough, tough, Texas native with a cigar stuck in his face in cowboy boots, and there I am in a three-piece suit with my hair all combed. I was the rich kid who didn't drink and liked to watch Richard Simmons on TV. Jerry Jarrett was a genius in a number of ways in booking. He made me a heel because I wanted to get back at all these guys who had turned me down and humiliated me. So then I signed up the bad guys.

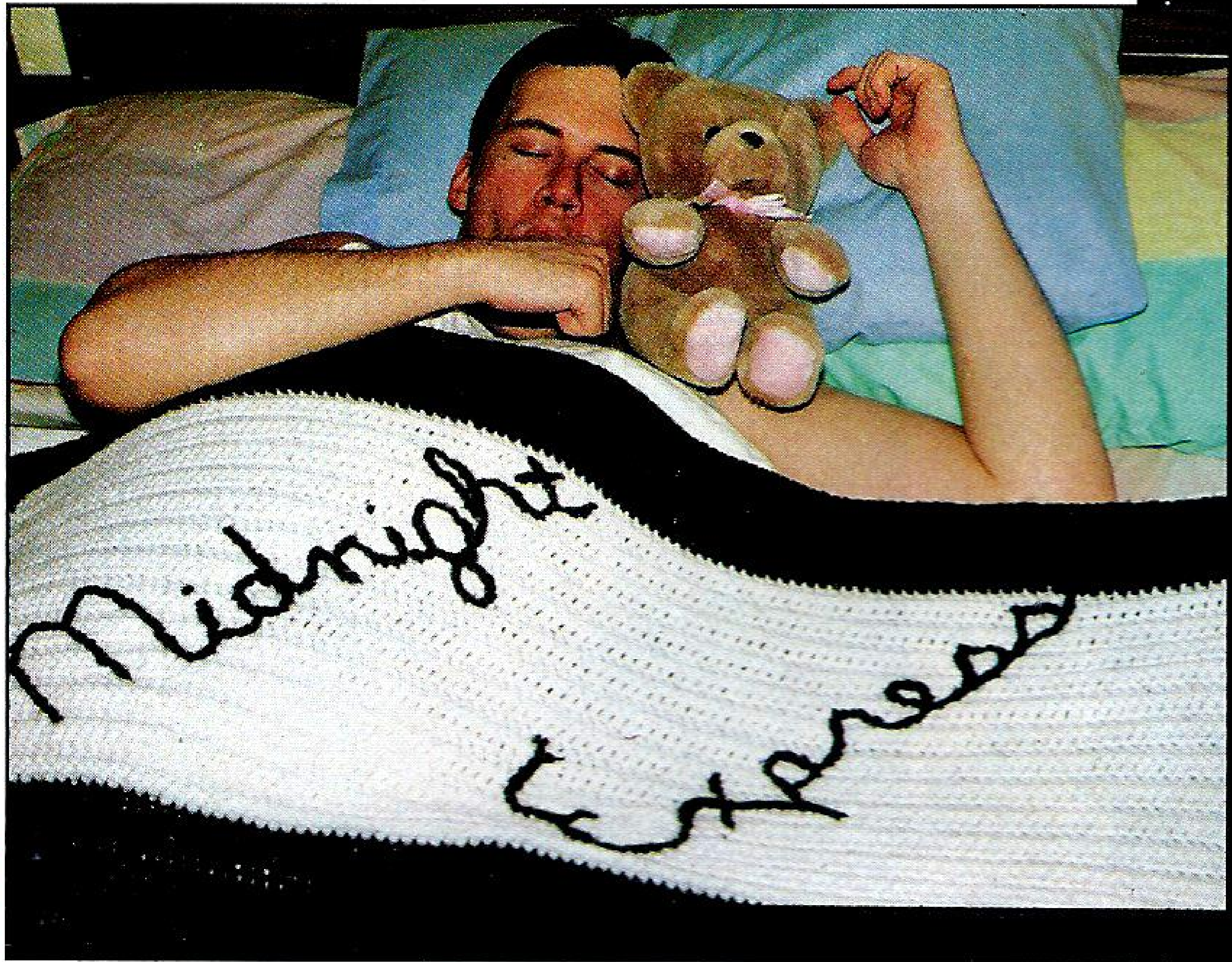
Q: I've heard you say that your trademark tennis racket was something you picked up just so you had a weapon in your hands if a fan got too riled up and jumped over the guardrail to get at you. But why a tennis racket, of all things?

A: When we first went to Mid-South Wrestling in Louisiana, I had already had a few skirmishes with fans. The fans in the Tennessee-Kentucky area weren't so bad. In Louisiana, they were Cajuns and cowboys from Oklahoma, and Bill Watts was such a genius at getting a strong emotional reaction from them. They loved the babyfaces more than they loved their own family. They hated the heels and wanted to see them die. There, you would get people on a weekly basis jumping in the ring, trying to get to you. I went down there and saw those people and said, "Damn, they're going to kill me!"

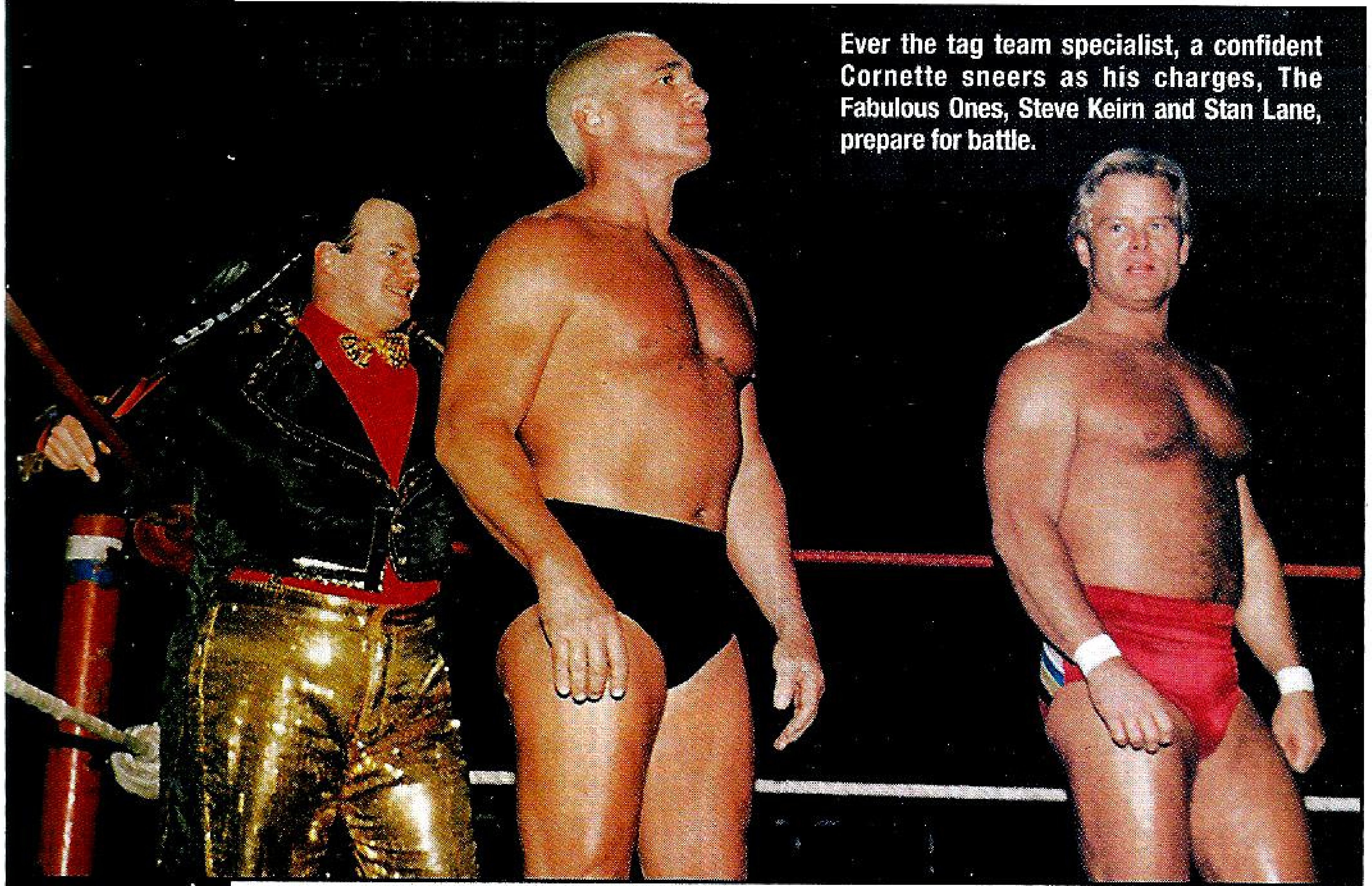
I just happened to go to the movies with my girlfriend before we started there and I saw one of those teen movies that were popular at the time. The rich kid in the group always was carrying around a badminton racket. I thought, *Aha!* A tennis racket might be a little heftier, so I brought one down and I asked Watts if I could carry it. He said "Sure, kid, go for it." That was what I used to try to fend the people off when the going got tough. It came in handy because a lot of times we would have been killed.

Q: Jim, let's jump over to Jim Crockett Promotions and the NWA. The Midnight Express is the team you will always be most closely associated with. Dennis Condrey, Bobby Eaton, and Stan Lane all had good careers after that team broke up, but none of them ever had as much success as singles wrestlers. Why was that particular team as successful and influential as it was?

A: It would take a book to tell you everything, and I'm in the process of writing that book. It was the right guys in the right place at the right time with the right opponents. Bill Watts saw that Dennis Condrey was a tremendous ring general. He wasn't spectacular at anything, but he could do everything well, and was one of the best workers I've ever seen, especially as a heel. He was always in the right place at the right time. Bobby Eaton was phenomenal. To this day, you still hear guys saying, "So-and-so takes bumps like Bobby Eaton." He flew off the ropes; his selling was



No doubt dreaming about a world tag team title for his favorite tandem, the "rich kid" takes a break from the rigors of managing.



Ever the tag team specialist, a confident Cornette sneers as his charges, The Fabulous Ones, Steve Keirn and Stan Lane, prepare for battle.

incredible. They both really knew tag team wrestling because Tennessee was a tag team territory and they had spent most of their careers there.

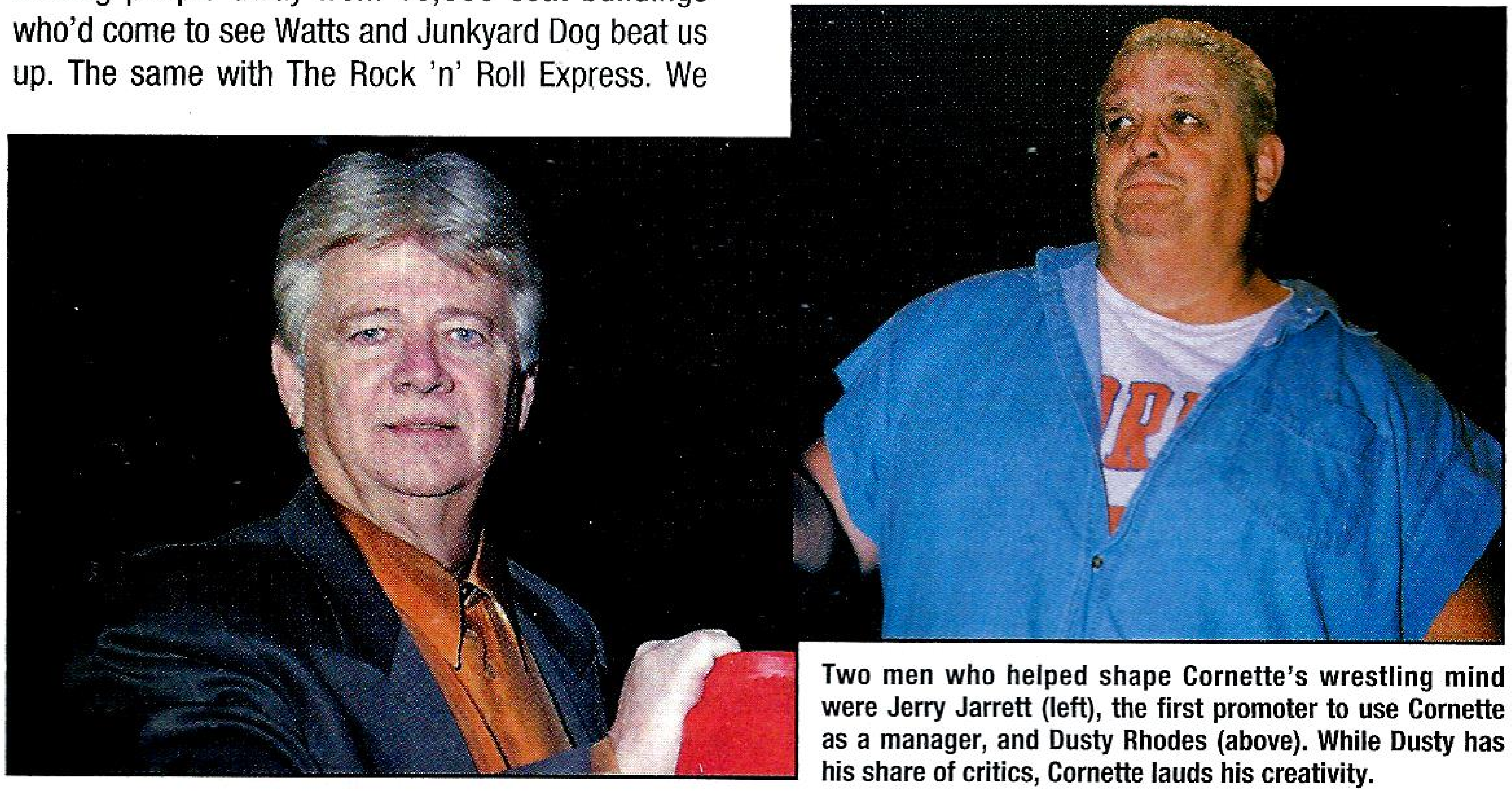
From the first time they teamed up, they had good tag matches. They had a different style than the folks were used to seeing in Mid-South, with the King Kong Bundys and the big heels. Here were the little heels with the chicken manager who were all believable. Watts was able to put us in situations where people literally paid to see us get our asses kicked every night.

The Rock 'n' Roll Express was the antithesis of everything we were. They were the little guys, the underdogs who had to win in the end. We were turning people away from 10,000-seat buildings who'd come to see Watts and Junkyard Dog beat us up. The same with The Rock 'n' Roll Express. We practically ran all year with that in 1984. Because of the spot Bill Watts had put us in and the work we had done for him, we basically were set. Everybody knew The Midnight Express. In December 1983, they weren't a team. In April 1984, they put 20,000 people in the Superdome. We could write our own ticket.

Q: But Stan Lane came in and replaced Condrey in 1987. How did that come together? Was it a matter of Condrey wanting out of the NWA or did Jim Crockett Promotions force him out?

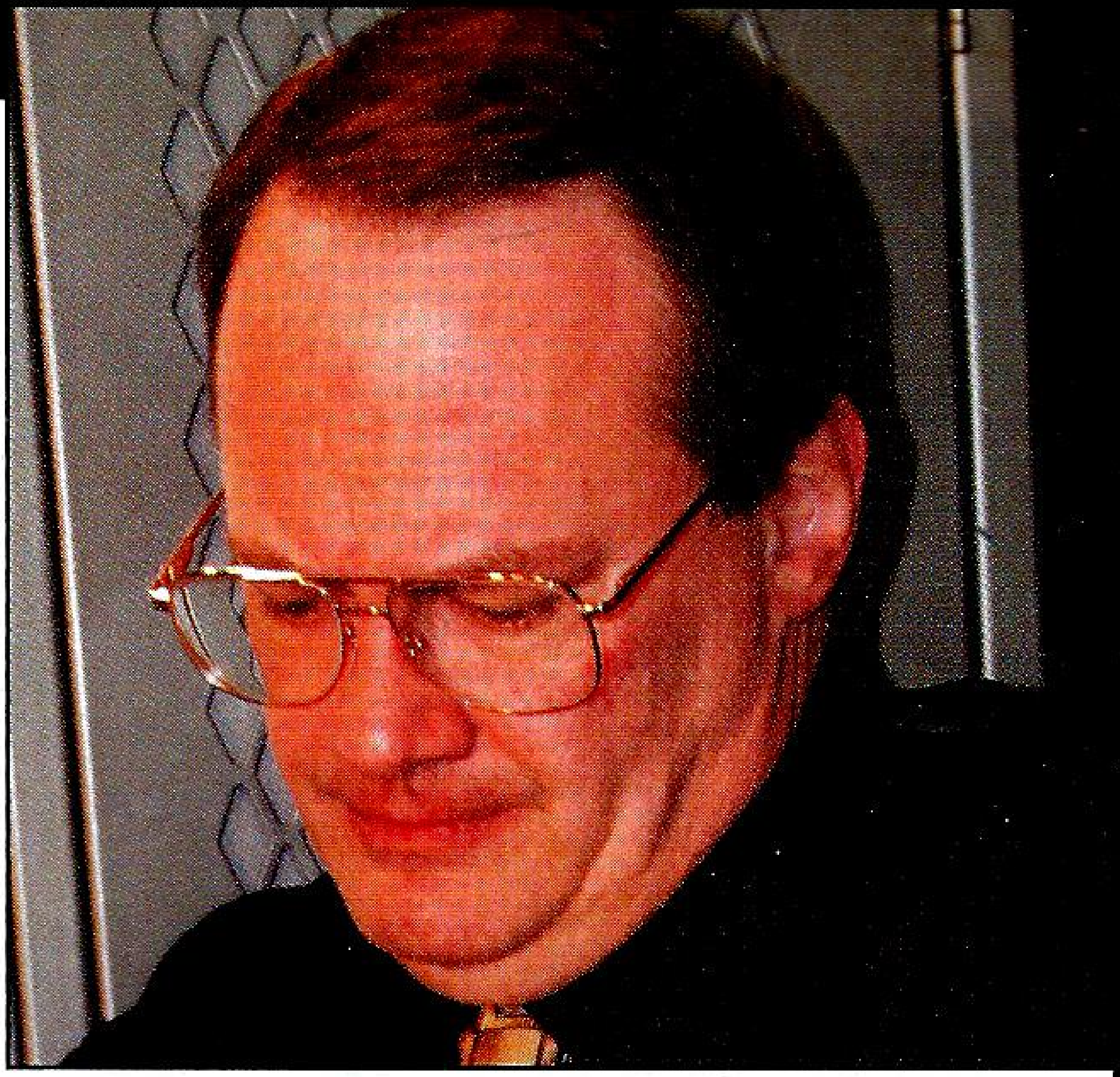
A: Dennis was with us while we worked for Crockett for the first two years. From Louisiana, we spent six months in World Class in Dallas. Watts wanted to keep us close. We worked on the same events as Ric Flair in Louisiana. He plugged us to Jimmy Crockett. And we worked against Dusty Rhodes at the Superdome on one show. He was booking and wanted to bring us in. We knew that was a big-money territory and the place to go. We went to Dallas because Watts wanted us down there. Even though our run in his territory was finished, he was working with Fritz Von Erich at the time and he could bring us back over for the Superdome and the Oklahoma City shows. We put off our date with Crockett and went to work for World Class.

The problems with World Class had been well documented. We thought, and we were right, that it



Two men who helped shape Cornette's wrestling mind were Jerry Jarrett (left), the first promoter to use Cornette as a manager, and Dusty Rhodes (above). While Dusty has his share of critics, Cornette lauds his creativity.

"Jerry Jarrett was a genius in a number of ways in booking. He made me a heel because I wanted to get back at all the guys who had turned me down and humiliated me."



was kind of a small-money territory that had accidentally gotten hot with a brilliant Freebirds and Von Erichs angle that Gary Hart put together. So we spent six months there, working with The Fantastics and it was a great short-trip territory with more days off than we got working for Watts. It was a paid vacation. We maybe made $1,000 a week on average, and we only worked four or five days a week. After six months we were going nowhere. There was no upward mobility, no working with the Von Erichs. We gave notice and started on Turner Broadcasting System in July 1985.

The plan for six months was to build to revamping The Midnight Express vs. The Rock 'n' Roll Express feud, this time on national TV. A lot of people have knocked Dusty Rhodes as a booker. I think he's a freaking genius. He may have recycled, which all bookers do. I've done it. He may have stuck with things for too long because he didn't have a great option or whatever. But for the time we worked with him, he was a genius and we drew lots of fans to our house shows. The whole package—The Horsemen, Dusty, Magnum T.A., Nikita Koloff, The Midnight Express, The Rock 'n' Roll Express—we drew house show crowds Vince McMahon would lust after right now.

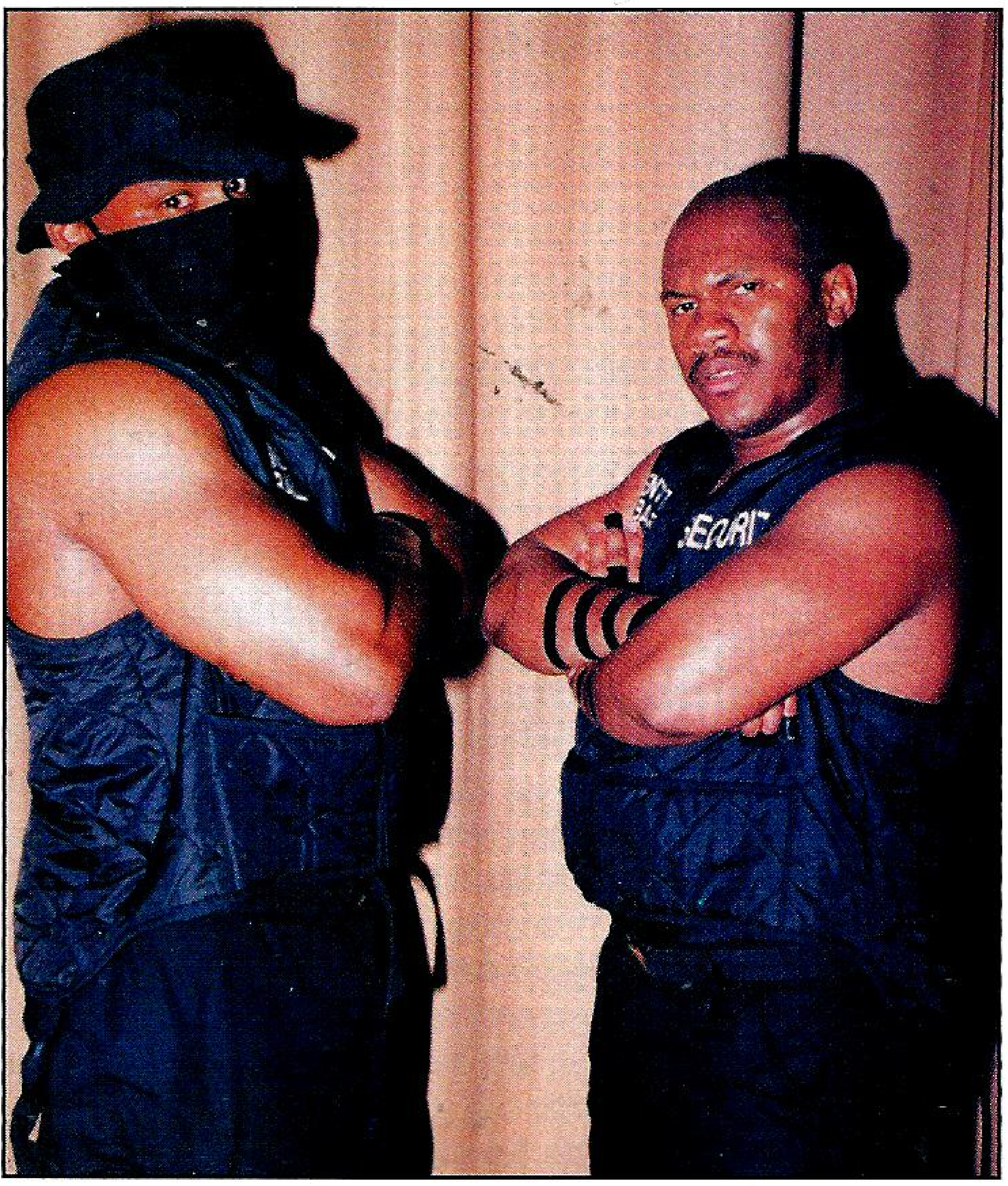
By January 1986, we got with The Rock 'n' Roll Express and Flair was wrestling Dusty. We were making $4,000 to $5,000 a week apiece. We were the tag team champions from February to August, and then beat The Rock 'n' Roll Express. Then we dropped the belts back to The Rock 'n' Roll Express. Dennis was part of that run. I go into greater detail on this in my book, but Dennis just disappeared. He dropped us off one night and said, "See you tomorrow." We didn't see him again for a year-and-a-half. We found out later it was a personal situation that didn't involve us. He wasn't running from the law, there weren't any drug problems. He needed a change in his life because he had been working 15 years straight in the wrestling business.

Q: He was getting burned out?

A: He needed to get away, and he did. The only thing he regretted was that he didn't tell us about it beforehand. For four years, we were together with each other more than we were with our families—4,000 miles a week in the car, always working on the road. It was hard to say, "I'm going," so he just went. We had to do something because The Midnight Express was a top team, and we were figured into a lot of stuff coming up. After four, five, six days, we had never been out of touch with each other for more than a couple days the whole time we had been partners. Dusty said, "If Dennis came back it would be great, but it doesn't look like he's coming back. We got to do something. Who can we get?" My first thought was Dr. Tom Prichard, who was doing some great work in Continental Wrestling at that time. I floated that idea and Dusty said, "Let me think about it."

A couple days later, he said, "Come to the office in Charlotte." We got there, and Stan Lane was sitting there. Crockett had just bought Florida Championship Wrestling, which was doing pretty

Cornette's differences with Paul Heyman eventually went from the ring to the front office. Although they remain cordial to each other, Cornette says he can no longer do business with Heyman.



Some of the problems between Cornette and Heyman center around The Gangstas (Mustafa and New Jack). After failing to win over Smokey Mountain Wrestling fans, Cornette helped pave the way for their ECW entrance.

poorly. When we were there, we didn't think of staying because Stan Lane and Steve Keirn were there as The Fabulous Ones. They had been one of the top teams in the business for five years. What we didn't know was that Steve had decided to get out of the business, so Stan was sitting down there as a singles wrestler for a couple months without anything to do. We had known Stan from Memphis. In one of those weird ironies, when Jarrett started me in the business, he wanted me to manage The Fabulous Ones, a team he was putting together as a takeoff of The Fabulous Fargos from the 1960s. But they got over so bombastically as babyfaces, he would have been crazy to turn them. Here we were, five years later. We did Atlanta TV two days later and introduced Stan. We did the Boston Garden the very first night against The Road Warriors in front of 10,000 people and off we ran.

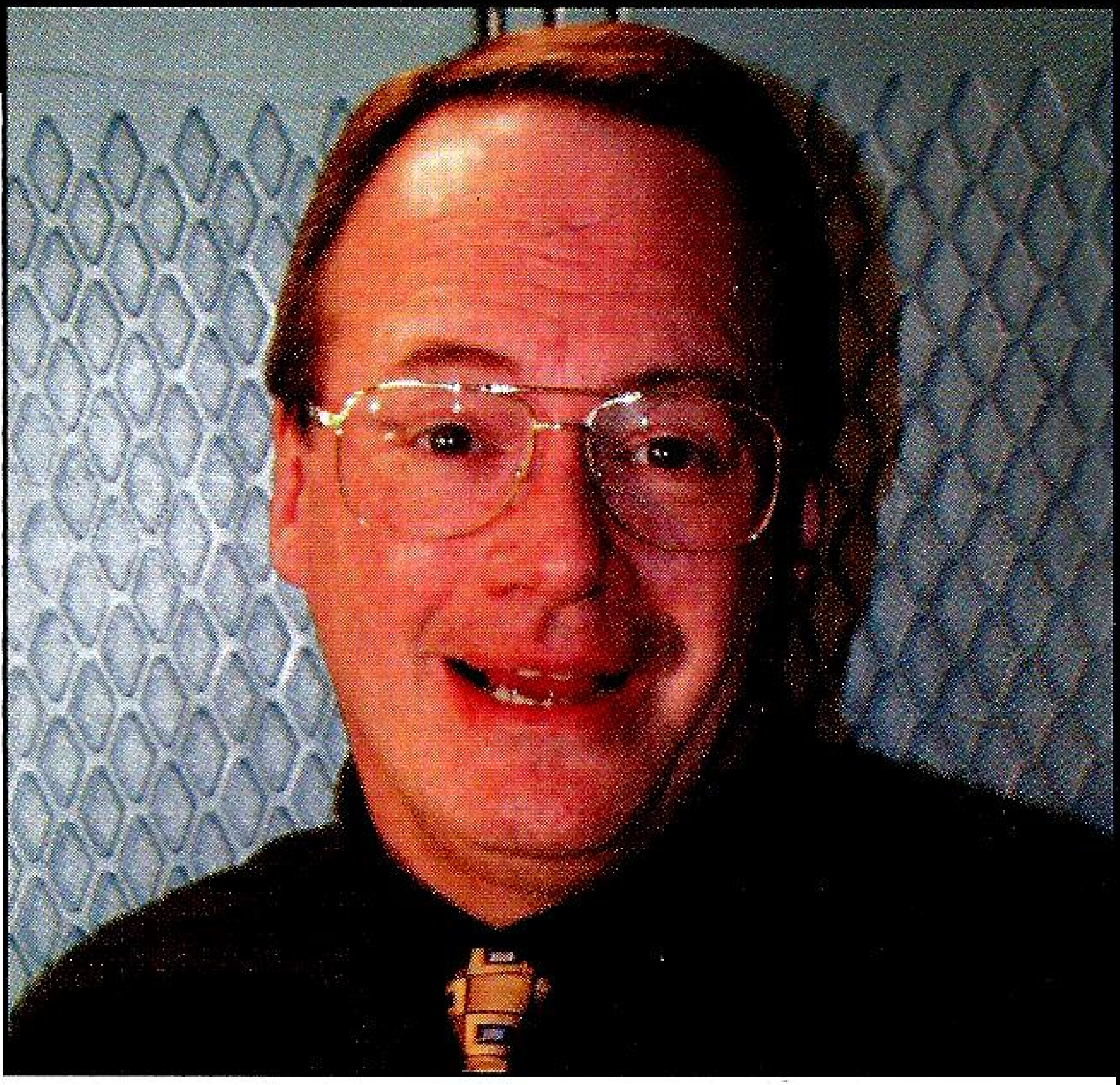
Q: In 1988, The Midnight Express won the NWA tag team title and dropped them quickly to The Road Warriors. In one of the most memorable moments of that time, you and The Express were sneak-attacked by Paul E. Dangerously and The Original Midnight Express. It was completely unexpected. When The Original Midnight Express came out, David Crockett exclaimed, "They don't even wrestle here!" It was also your first storyline involving a person you would have a very rocky relationship with: Paul Heyman. What were your feelings about that storyline at that time?

A: I'd better have liked the storyline because it was mine! September 10, 1988: Tully Blanchard and Arn Anderson leave the NWA. Their last night was in Philadelphia and they drop the World tag team title to The Midnight Express. But they were mad at Dusty and mad at the same time at what was about to take place with Turner Broadcasting [TBS' purchase of Jim Crockett Promotions], so they went to the WWF. All of a sudden, here we are, the tag team champions with no one to wrestle. It was a surprise Tully and Arn left. We had to come up with something.

Dennis had come back to the business, and was teaming with Randy Rose, who was one of his old tag team partners, and Paul E. was managing them as The Original Midnight Express in the AWA. At that time, believe it or not, Heyman and I talked cordially to each other. I had known him since he was a photographer in New York before he got into the business. So we talked on the phone and I said, "Do you guys want to come in and do a Midnight vs. Midnight deal?" He said yes, so we went to Dusty and Dusty said, "Okay, Dennis left once before. If you guys don't want him, then we won't have him. But if you guys want him, we'll have him." Of course, we wanted him. We wanted to do this

As on-screen manager and backstage consultant, Cornette helped guide Yokozuna to a WWF World title in 1993. Here, it looks like Cornette's having some difficulty keeping the big man under control.

"I just happened to go to the movies with my girlfriend and I saw one of those teen movies that were popular at the time. The rich kid in the group always was carrying around a badminton racket. I thought, *Aha!*"



angle. What if they came out on television? I get a phone call because Heyman's known for the phone, and I blow it off. They jump us, beat the piss out of us, and leave us in a bloody heap. Dusty, being the genius and the editor he was, said, "No. They just leave *you* in a bloody heap. The fans have already seen The Midnight Express bleed, but they have never seen *you* bleed. Now it's a big deal and The Midnight Express is the home team against The Original Midnights, who are the invaders."

We did it and it clicked and people went nuts for it on television. That's right when Turner Broadcasting took over and Dusty was booted as booker. Turner Broadcasting couldn't grab their ass with both hands, so the program got screwed up and never really drew any money. But people remember it to this day because the emotion was real.

Q: Was that the first time you had been busted open?

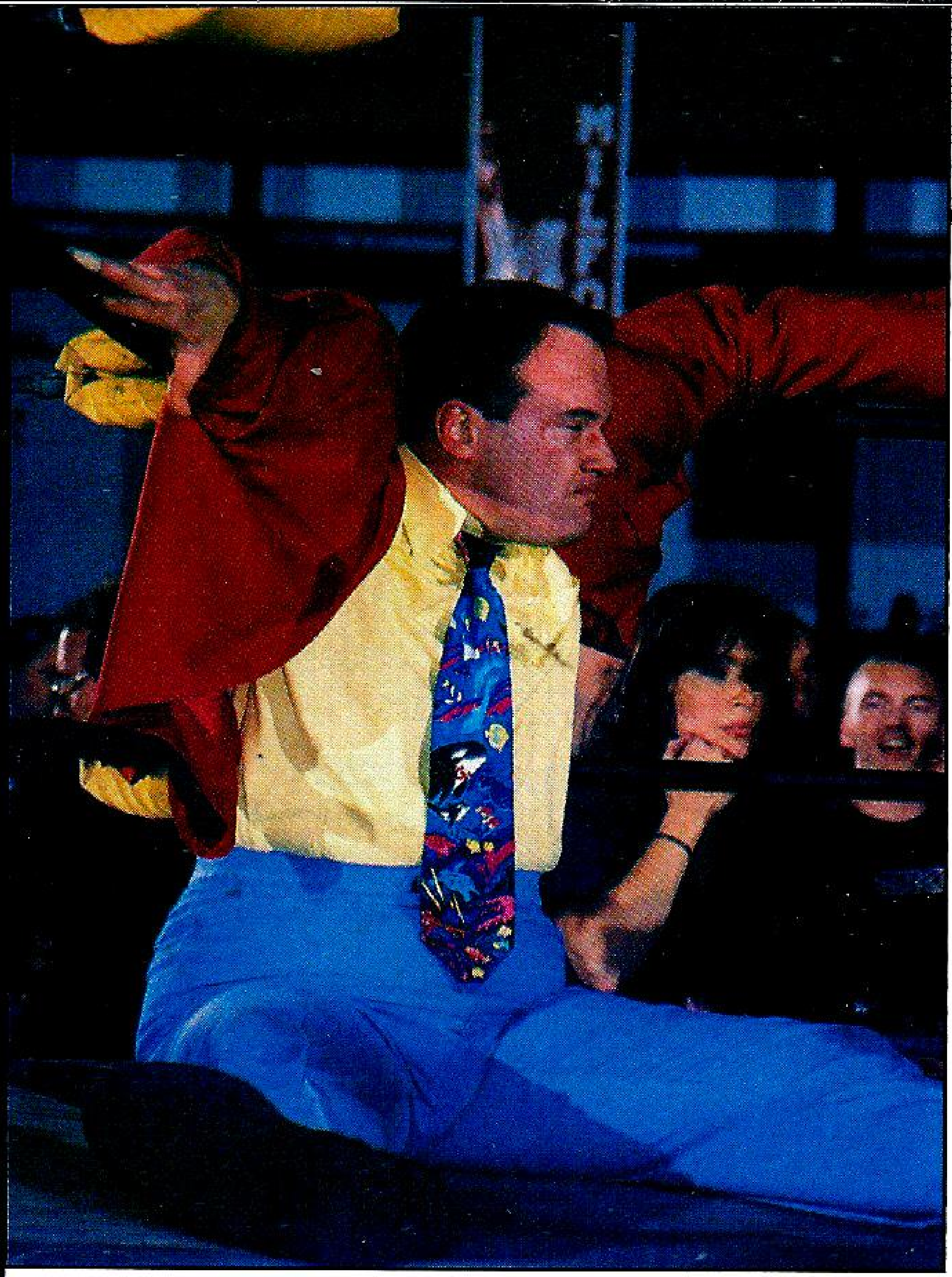
A: I had bled a number of times from hardways, accidents, and fans getting at me, but I had never bled on national television or with the NWA, per se. The point being it was a shock. It was personal. It was real. The promos were great and the matches were great, too, because all the guys could work. Randy Rose tried to keep up as best he could. And the people could believe it.

Q: Eventually, the relationship between you and Paul went in a different direction? Was it a personality conflict, or just because the two of you had very different approaches to the wrestling business? What caused that friction?

A: After I quit WCW in late-1990, Paul would call me at home saying, "You got 'em right where you want 'em." I'd say, "I'm not coming back, Paul. I hate those people. I'm not going to work for them." He couldn't believe the idea that I was actually telling the truth and it wasn't a negotiating tactic, because his mind didn't think that way. He was also trying to make sure, I guess, that I wasn't coming back. There was no heat there until several years later when I was running Smoky Mountain Wrestling. It was a situation over The Gangstas. I had basically brought New Jack and Mustafa in from a little promotion in Georgia. They were making $20 a match and I gave them the gimmick, pushed them on television, and ran them through every team I had in SMW. I did everything I could with them. I gave them a job for a year, put them in the ring with The Undertaker, and gave them the biggest payoffs they ever had in one night. I gave them three months notice and told them I'd try to find a place for them to go. WWF didn't want them. Memphis didn't want them. So I tried ECW. I called Paul and said, "These guys are tailor-made for you. I'll finish them up on July 1, and you can have them."

So I booked them to do one favor on the way out to my top babyface team. Then I hear from New

Cornette excelled as the sneaky manager who'd kick a wrestler when he's down or jab a tennis racket in his throat, as he does here to Jimmy Del Ray.



No stranger to the bumps and bruises of in-ring performances, Cornette's much more vulnerable without his ever-present tennis racket.

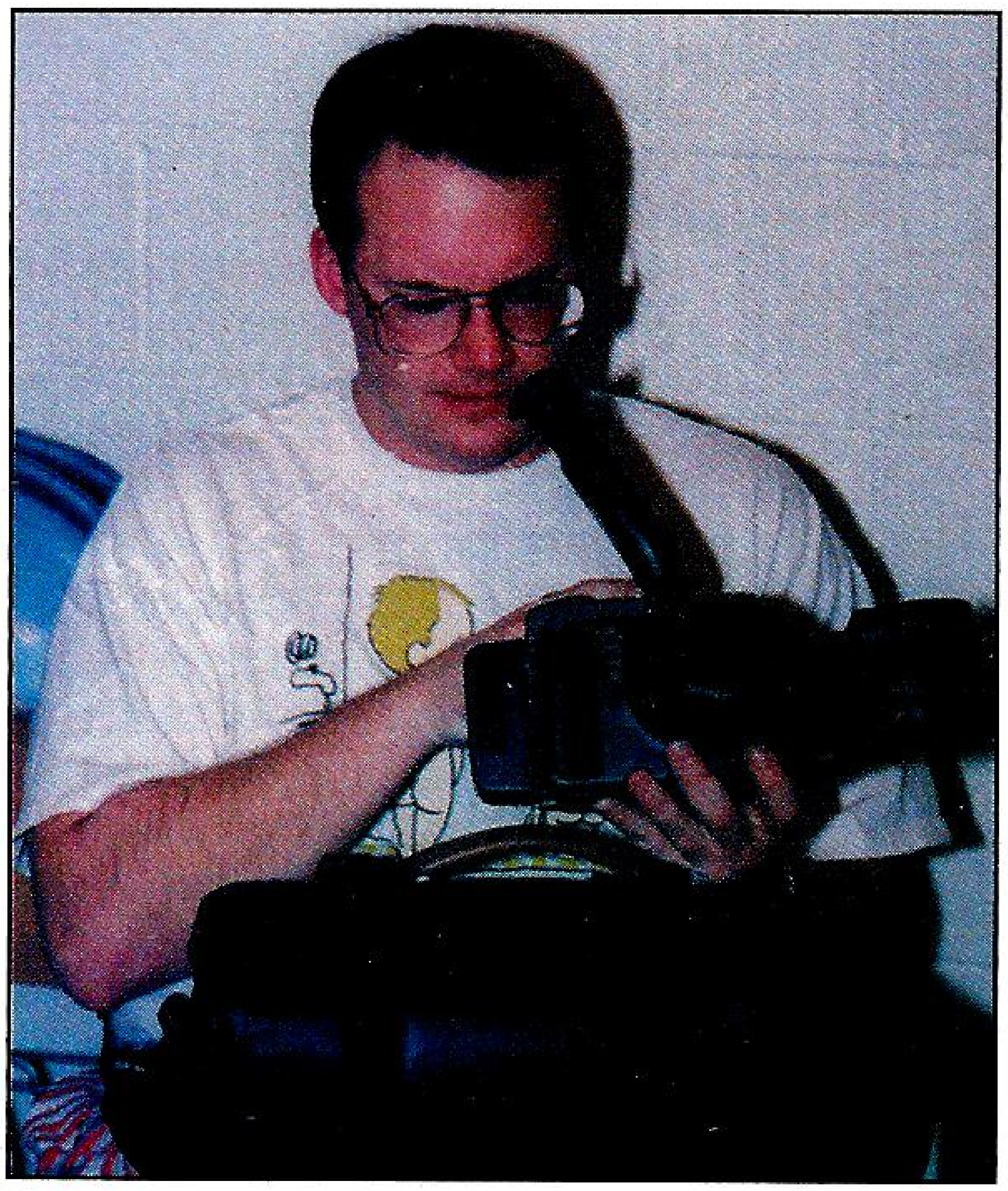
Jack that he's talked to Heyman and Tod Gordon. If they don't start in the middle of June, then they can never start. I said, "Look, I'll clear it up. Make these dates." So I call Paul and said, "I've got a controversy here. When can they start?" He says, "Oh, I don't want to take them away from you. They got to finish your dates." As I hang up the phone, he says, "Let me know if you fire them." So the middle of June comes, and they no-show the last two weeks when they were finally supposed to do the favor. Then they go up on his TV and start knocking me, doing shoot interviews saying I owed them money. The only reason I owed them money was because they never came to pick up their last check, which basically was $100. Paul lied to me. I didn't see why he was letting them on TV in Philadelphia to knock me down in Tennessee when we weren't working together.

Q: Yet, a couple years later, you made a surprise appearance at the ECW Arena. How did that develop?

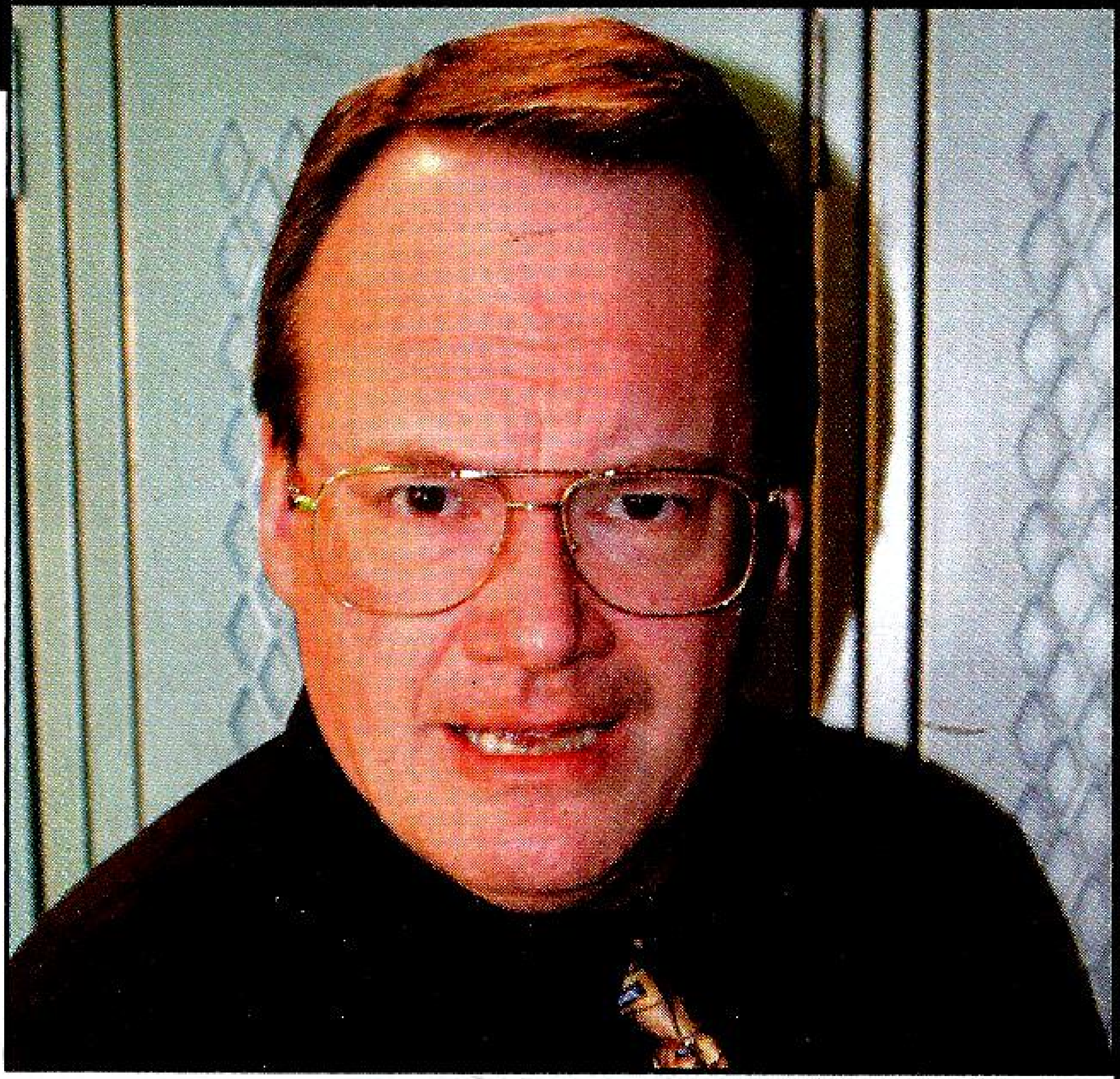
A: The opportunity came through Chris Candido. Candido said he wanted me to make an ECW show as a surprise. I said one of my good friends for 10 years, NWA promoter Dennis Corralluzzo, had a lot of problems with Heyman, so I don't want a payoff. I'll do it for free if he will shake hands with Dennis and apologize to him for that NWA title tournament where Heyman conned everybody and made fools out of the NWA, and made a fool out of Dennis for suggesting it and being there. He basically spit in his face when Shane Douglas threw the belt down. If he would just apologize, shake Dennis' hand, and agree that the ECW guys can work for Dennis on their days off, I'll do the show for nothing. The time comes for the show and Heyman sends a chauffeur-driven limo for me, from Connecticut to Philadelphia, which I didn't ask for but I took. He sends Corralluzzo and me to Morton's Steakhouse, which I didn't ask for but I accepted. I rode in to do the deal on the show. I ran in 10 minutes before the show because it was a surprise. The lights went out, the lights come back on and I'm in the ring hitting everybody with the racket. Then we ran right out before there was a riot. Heyman gets in the limousine now, with Corralluzzo and me. He shakes Dennis' hand and says, "All is in the past, and all is forgiven. I was going to have a meeting and announce it to the talent tonight, but since this is a surprise deal, we don't have time to go in and make the explanation with the show going on. I'll tell everyone tomorrow."

As I jump into the limousine, he slaps an envelope in my hand. *What the heck is this?* Seven hundred and fifty dollars in cash in a plain envelope, which I didn't ask for. Okay, I'll take that, too, because I got what I asked for. But Heyman never had the meeting, never announced that the hatchet was buried with Corralluzzo. Then, a couple days later, he was going around telling all the boys that

Judging by the reaction on Cornette's face, it looks as though he's never seen a video camera before. But in fact, Cornette broke into the business as a photographer.



"We had cordial conversations. But the problem is, Paul Heyman would rather climb a tree and tell a lie than stand on the ground and tell the truth. I can't deal with somebody who lies to me."



Corralluzzo was breaking the deal they had made, so I never went back.

That was the problem I had with Paul. Three years ago, when I was having problems with WWE, he was, too. So they exiled him. See, they knew I liked working in Louisville, so they had to get me out of there, and they knew he would hate having to go to Louisville. That's why they had to send him here. We commiserated on how we both knew Vince McMahon and everybody who stooges for him are [expletive deleted]. We had cordial conversations. But the problems is, Paul Heyman would rather climb a tree and tell a lie than stand on the ground and tell the truth. I don't care what else happens. I can't deal with somebody who lies to me. I will agree Paul is a good booker and a mad genius at creating certain things. But I hated the hardcore garbage because it was bad for the business and for the boys.

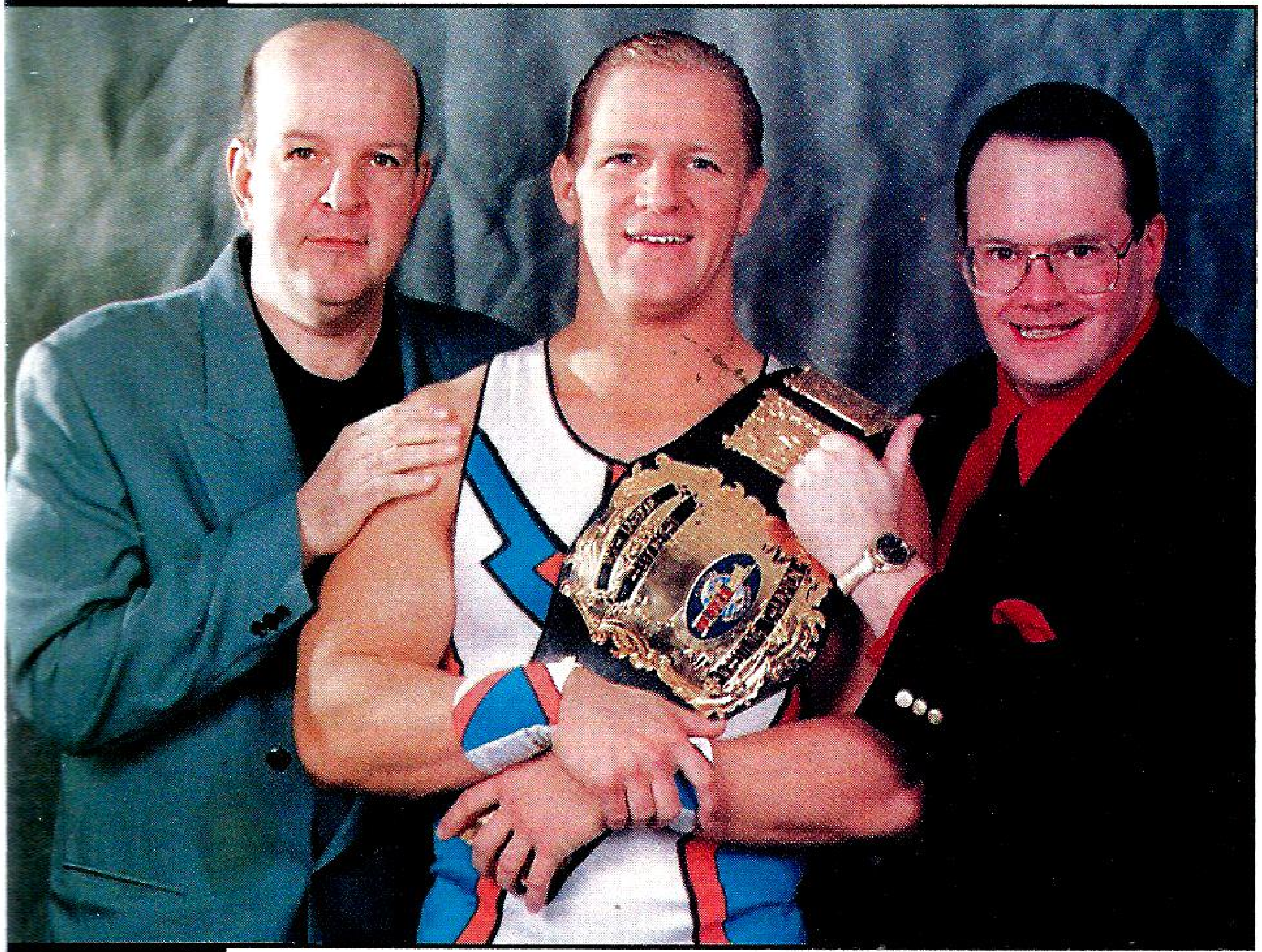
Q: Long-term, that style really just killed the business. When you had guys shrugging off multiple chair shots and getting beaten to hell and kicking out at two, the fans wouldn't accept a single chair shot as a finish. It burned out audiences.

A: Long-term it's killed the business and some of the boys! And Paul never had to do it. He never jumped off a scaffold. He had one in Memphis and climbed halfway up and came right back down. Jerry Jarrett fired him. He didn't have to take the bumps, although he took some. He didn't have to go through what he put the boys through. I never asked guys to do stuff that I wouldn't do, or wouldn't do if I could. Heyman had these guys flying off balconies through three tables that were set on fire with thumbtacks, broken glass, barbed wire. I didn't like his style of wrestling, but when he applies himself to actual wrestling, he does a good job and he can get a lot out of talent. But you can't believe anything he says, and that's why, to this day, I can't have any kind of working relationship with Paul Heyman.

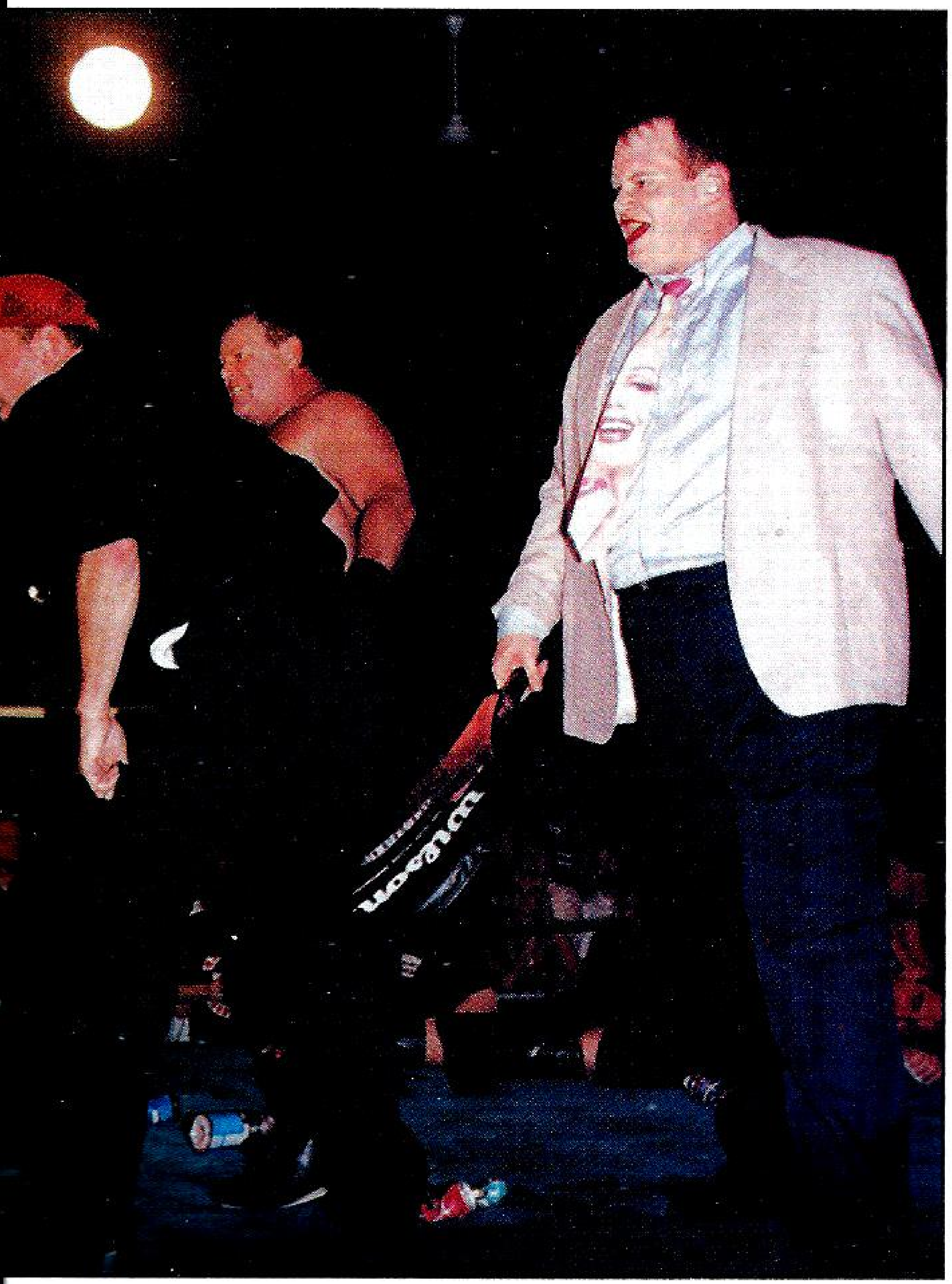
Q: ECW has that legacy of pushing the envelope, but you were doing some really cutting-edge storylines in Smoky Mountain with The Gangstas doing some of the most racially charged promos ever. In fact, you had an incident down there in 1995 that has been labeled a "race riot," and there are a lot of stories about what exactly happened. What really happened?

A: One of the incidents we had didn't have anything to do with The Gangstas, and that's what people have called the "race riot." It was in Wise, Virginia, at the little college there. We were just having a spot show. It was Ron and Don Harris and The Bruise Brothers against Jimmy Del Ray, Tom Prichard, and The Heavenly Bodies. I was managing the Bodies. As The Bruise Brothers chase me, I hide behind one of the college security guards, the big football-playing boys standing there with the T-shirts on that say "Security." And I'm hiding behind him going, "Keep him away from me! Keep him away from me!" Then one of these other guards apparently wanted to be part of the show. He comes over and he's a black guy and he says, "Hey, take your hands off my brother there." The guy I was hiding behind was white, so it's not like we have a racial divide here. I said, "Piss off, buddy, we're working here." So he starts mouthing off. It's been 14 years, I can't remember the exact details, but as the guy's yelling, Jimmy Del Ray gets hot. Now the guy's trying to lay his hands on me to shove me away from the guy I'm hiding behind, and that guy didn't really care what I'm doing. So Del Ray gets in his face.

We get those two straightened out and try to get back into the ring. This guy's yelling, so I yell to some of the other guys. And I'll be honest. I said, "Get that [n-word] out of here, would you [expletive] please! We're trying to have a match here!" I'm sorry if that's a racial term or a politically incorrect term. But at the time: (A) I'm the promoter; (B) I'm the manager of the freakin' heels in the main event; and (C) I'm seeing my match degenerate, and I'm pissed. If he'd been fat, I would have said, "Get that fat-ass out of here!" If he'd been



A wrestling traditionalist, Cornette, shown with Jeff Jarrett and the late NWA promoter Dennis Corralluzo, once represented a "pure" wrestling faction of the WWF (above). Cornette's disdain for extreme wrestling played into he and Jerry Lawler invading ECW in 1997 (below).



whatever-the-hell, I would have said, "Get that whatever-the-hell out of here!"

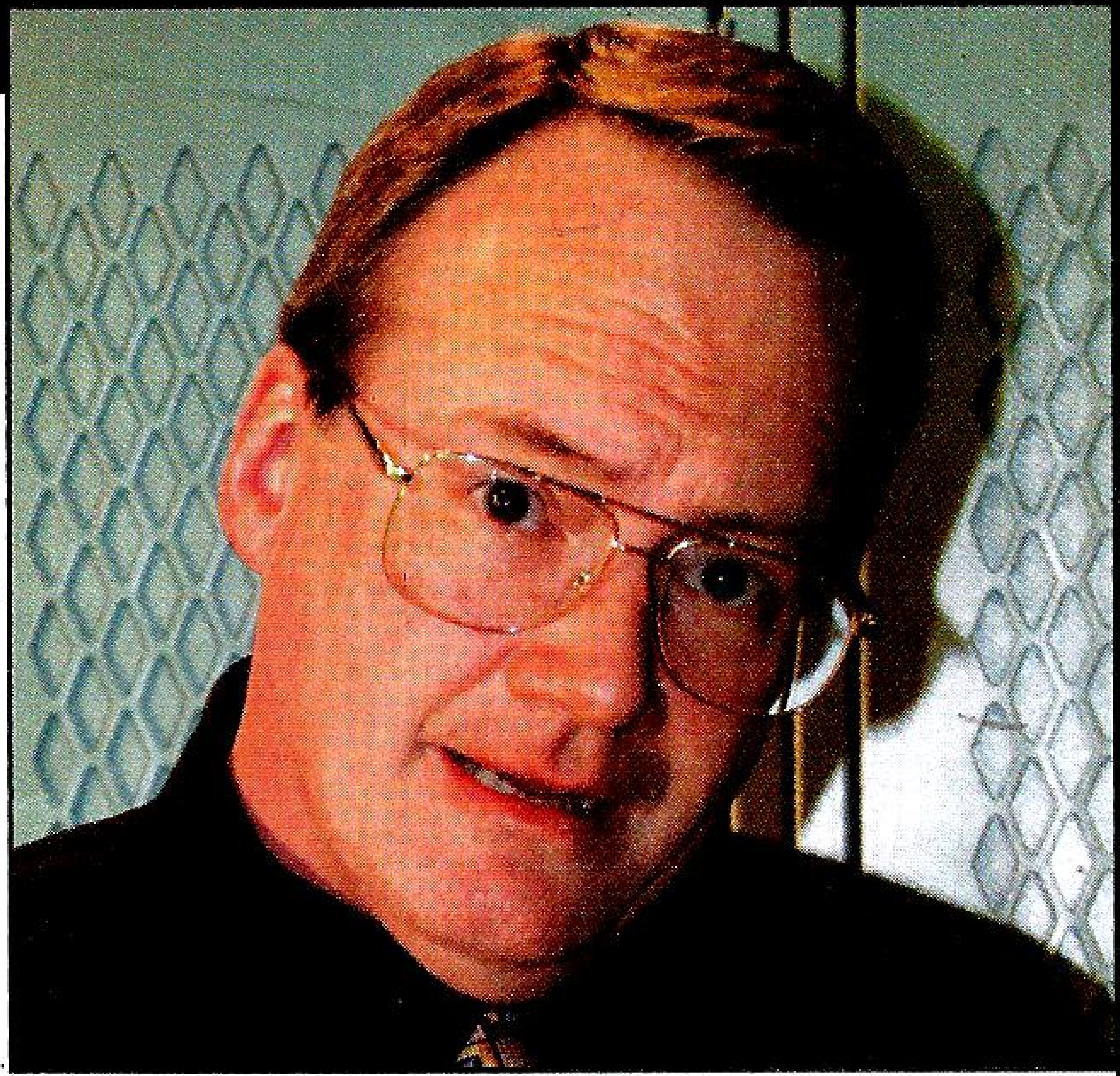
Well, here we go. Now they got to start shoving him out of there. I can't remember if they were all black or all white or a mixture. They decide they're ticked off and they start. We kick some of them out. Some of them go back, and by the time the match is over, they supposedly got a knife in the bleachers. I'm near-sighted but I'll take the guys' word that they saw it. As the heels try to go back under the bleachers, somebody's calling Del Ray up to fight and the guy pulls the knife out. Here come The Bruise Brothers. Everybody's punching and shoving everybody else. It was all just because this one guy had to become part of the show when no one was harming anybody. Let's face it: It's Wise, Virginia; not a lot goes on there. It makes the newspaper. The newspaper in Wise is eight pages long. One time the headline in one of those mountain newspapers was "New Stoplight To Be Put In At Intersection."

Q: And everybody knows what intersection they're talking about because there's only one in town.

A: Right. Then Wade Keller with the *Pro Wrestling Torch*—he's a little weasely [expletive] who had nothing better to do—he starts doing editorials on it like it's this big racially charged incident. All because a bunch of people cussed at each other at a spot show at a college in a hillbilly town in Virginia. Now there's this legend of this big race riot involving Smoky Mountain Wrestling when it was a bunch of bull. There wasn't a lawsuit, no one went to jail. The wrestlers actually got the worst of it because there were more people swinging at them and they were swinging back. That's all it was.

One more thing about The Gangstas. Was it an edgy angle? Yes. In the bigger cities like Knoxville and Johnson City, it eventually did well to finally see The Heavenly Bodies come back in and kick The Gangstas' asses, or The Undertaker kick The Gangstas' asses. But it killed us at our spot shows. I made the fatal mistake many bookers make when they try to do an edgy angle. It wasn't that the people hated The Gangstas and wanted to see somebody kick their asses. The people hated The Gangstas and didn't want to see them or any show they were on in the little towns. We lost Paynesville, Kentucky, one of our best spot show towns. I'll tell you exactly why, and no one reported this because it didn't make Jim Cornette look bad. The fire department had been our sponsor there. We drew almost 1,000 people in Paynesville. The Gangstas go there and one of the fire guys gets a phone call a

> **"I earned this reputation of being this racist wrestling promoter. In SMW, I had 18 full-time guys on the payroll and ... I had more black wrestlers on my payroll than Vince and WCW! And somehow I'm the racist."**



couple days later from a friend who lived in town. He says, "Hey, what were you doing walking those [n-word] back to the [expletive] locker room the other night?" The fire guys were the security, too. All their friends and neighbors are seeing these guys protect these quote-unquote n-words, because that's what they were calling them. And they didn't want to be involved in that. So all of a sudden, they didn't want any more matches.

The same kind of feedback was happening in those little hillbilly towns in eastern Kentucky and Virginia. Okay, they worked here a year. I fulfilled all the commitments I made to them. I give them notice, expect to work it out and try to find them a place to go. I did all those things and they didn't keep their word. New Jack was a terrific promo, but he couldn't work a lick. As a human being, he's less than crap, but a great promo. He was the one who came up with that! Do you think I, the epitome of a middle-aged white man, could write New Jack's promos? He was the one who came out and said, "They silenced Medgar Evers, they silenced Martin Luther King, and now they try to censor us!" I told New Jack to go out and get over. Rodney King had just happened. These guys were the badass gangstas from south central-L.A. In fact, one of our ring announcers in one of the local towns was so up on current events, he introduced them from south central-Louisiana."

Q: Because that was the only "L.A." he knew, eh?

A: That's what we were dealing with. I told New Jack to just go out and be real. One thing Watts always told me was if the people believe, then you've got them. Be real, but don't be comedy. That's what they did. It wasn't me telling poor, trod-upon New Jack to go out and play on racial prejudices. Barack Obama just said—and his speech ranked up there with the Gettysburg Address—"White people and black people in this country don't like each other in large part, and here's why. And both of them are right and both of them are wrong." Somebody needed to say it, because it's true. But I earned this reputation of being this racist wrestling promoter. In SMW, I had 18 full-time guys on the payroll and I had more black wrestlers—D-Lo Brown, whom I started and consider to be one of my best friends, Killer Kyle, New Jack, Mustafa, and one or two others. I had more black wrestlers on my payroll than Vince and WCW! And somehow I'm the racist.

Q: You and I once spoke about how tag team wrestling has changed through the years. You talked about how all these teams—The Hart Foundation, The Midnights, and Rock 'n' Rolls, The Road Warriors, The Bulldogs, etc.—were breaking out on the national stage because they came from different territories and had different looks and styles. That doesn't happen anymore

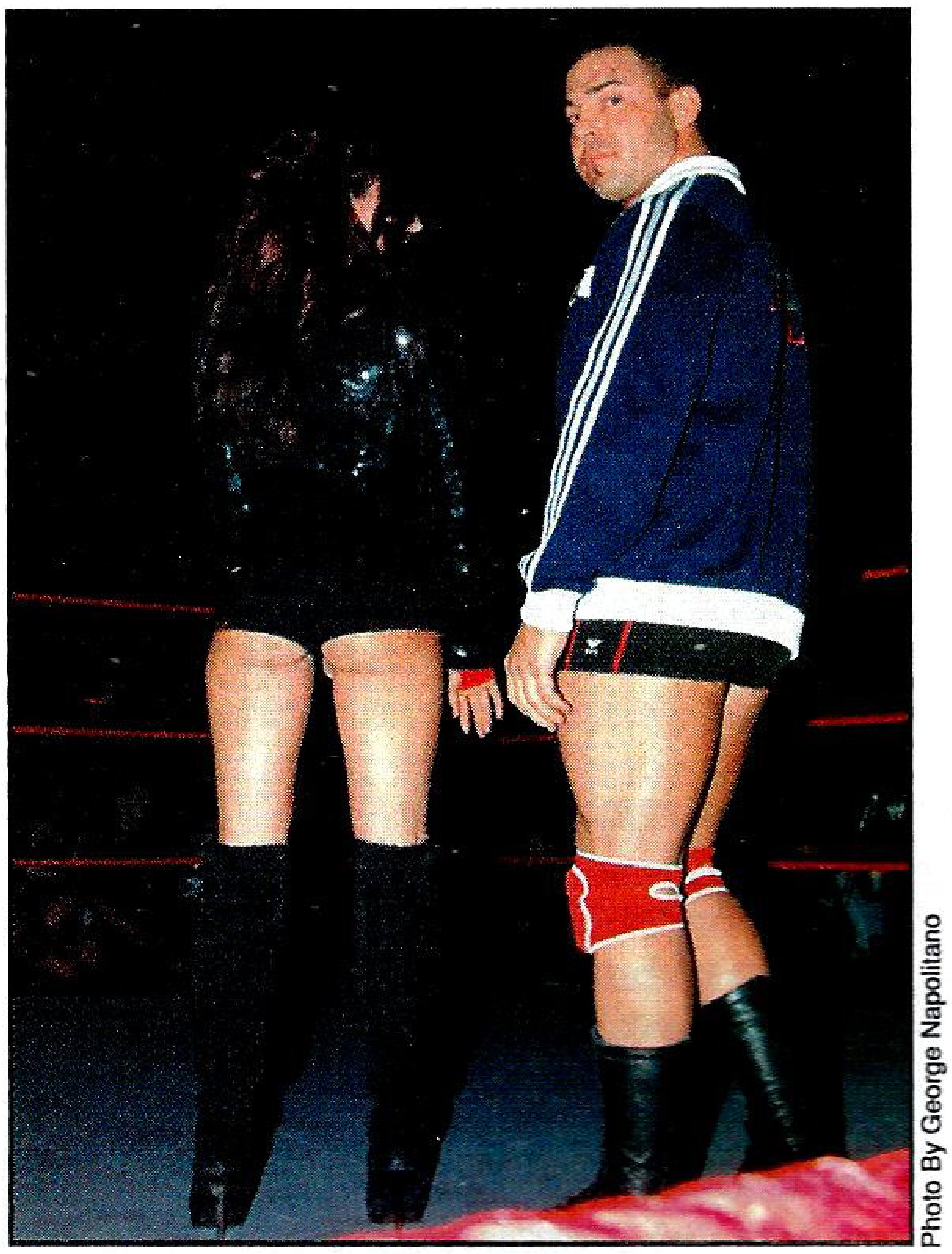
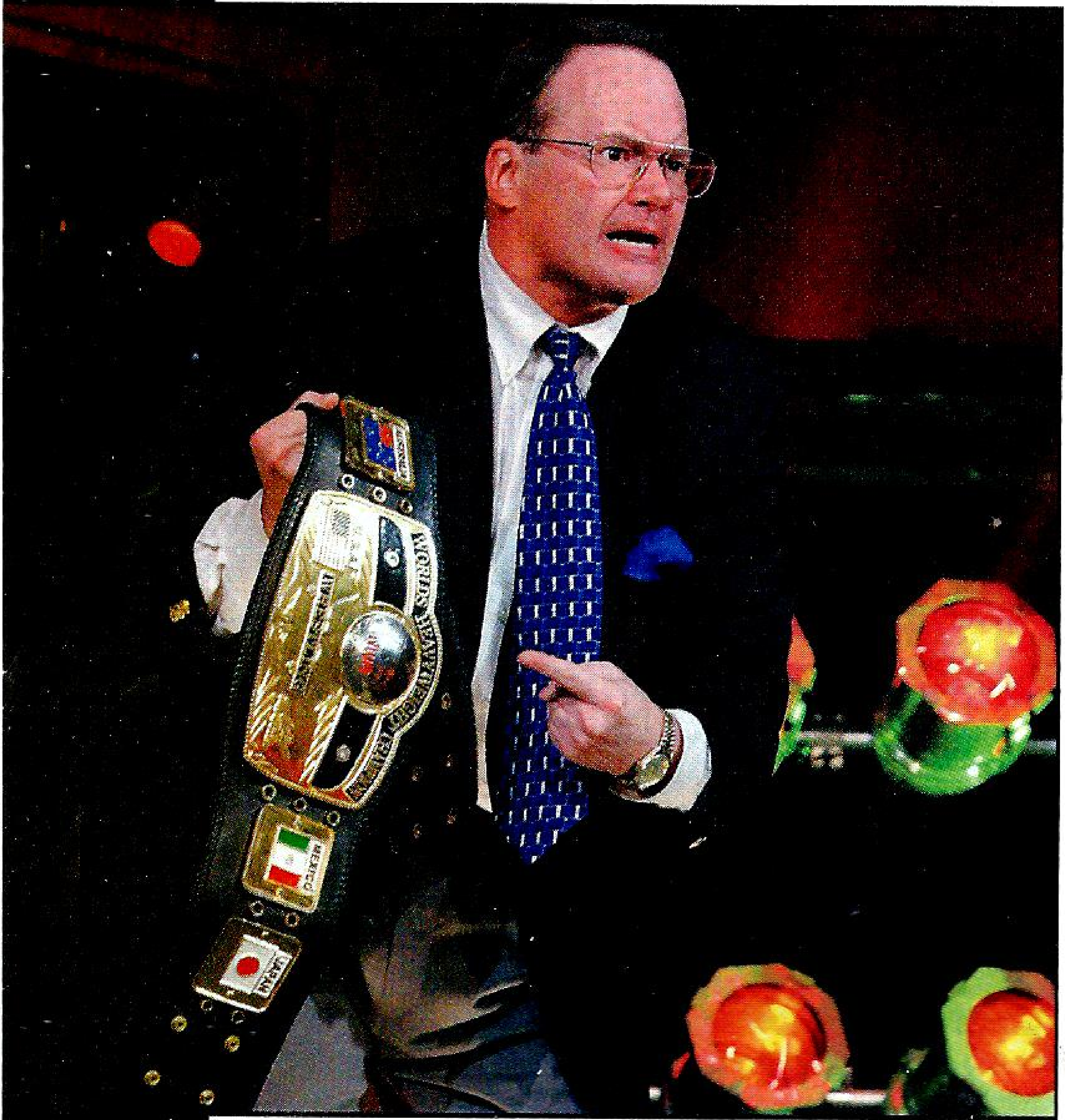


Photo By George Napoliano

Cornette had the opportunity to work with both Maria and Santino Marella in Ohio Valley Wrestling, then WWE's top developmental promotion. Cornette has less-than-fond memories of both WWE superstars in their formative days.



After leaving WWE, Cornette kept a low profile before reemerging in TNA. Apparently, time has done nothing to mellow the "Louisville Lip," who shows off his volatile side to the TNA fans.

because there are no more territories. How do you feel about WWE moving toward having a developmental system where all the wrestlers are retrained and remade to WWE's liking? Is that ultimately better for the wrestler and for WWE, or is wrestling losing something important in the process?

A: It would beautiful if it was done the way it used to be, and was done right. As they do it now, it's just more of the same. Anytime WWE has any kind of program going, they have to have full control over it and that's why I'm no longer with OVW. That's because of the amount of control they wanted to exert over our business here in Louisville. We were trying to perform a service for them and run a business at the same time. As booker, I would try to find talent that was good in the ring and had some personality and I would encourage them to develop some of that over time for themselves. What they want to do is find somebody, put some kind of gimmick on them based on what their so-called "creative team" thinks, and teach them to do just that. If that don't work, they just throw them away and find somebody else. They don't listen to the coaches in developmental who say this guy's ready or this guy's not. If a guy's got a good body or if Vince likes him or Stephanie thinks he looks like something, they bring him up. But if a guy's a good wrestler—and they still refuse to admit they are in the professional wrestling business—who can perform in the ring and do promos but doesn't have freakish size or an outlandish look or a silly gimmick, then they're stuck in developmental for three of four years before they cut him. They try to force personalities on these kids before they have any personality. So instead of training future wrestlers, they're training future gimmicks.

Q: Who are some of the guys who came up through OVW developmental that you thought should have gone further than they did or never got a chance because they got saddled with a lousy gimmick?

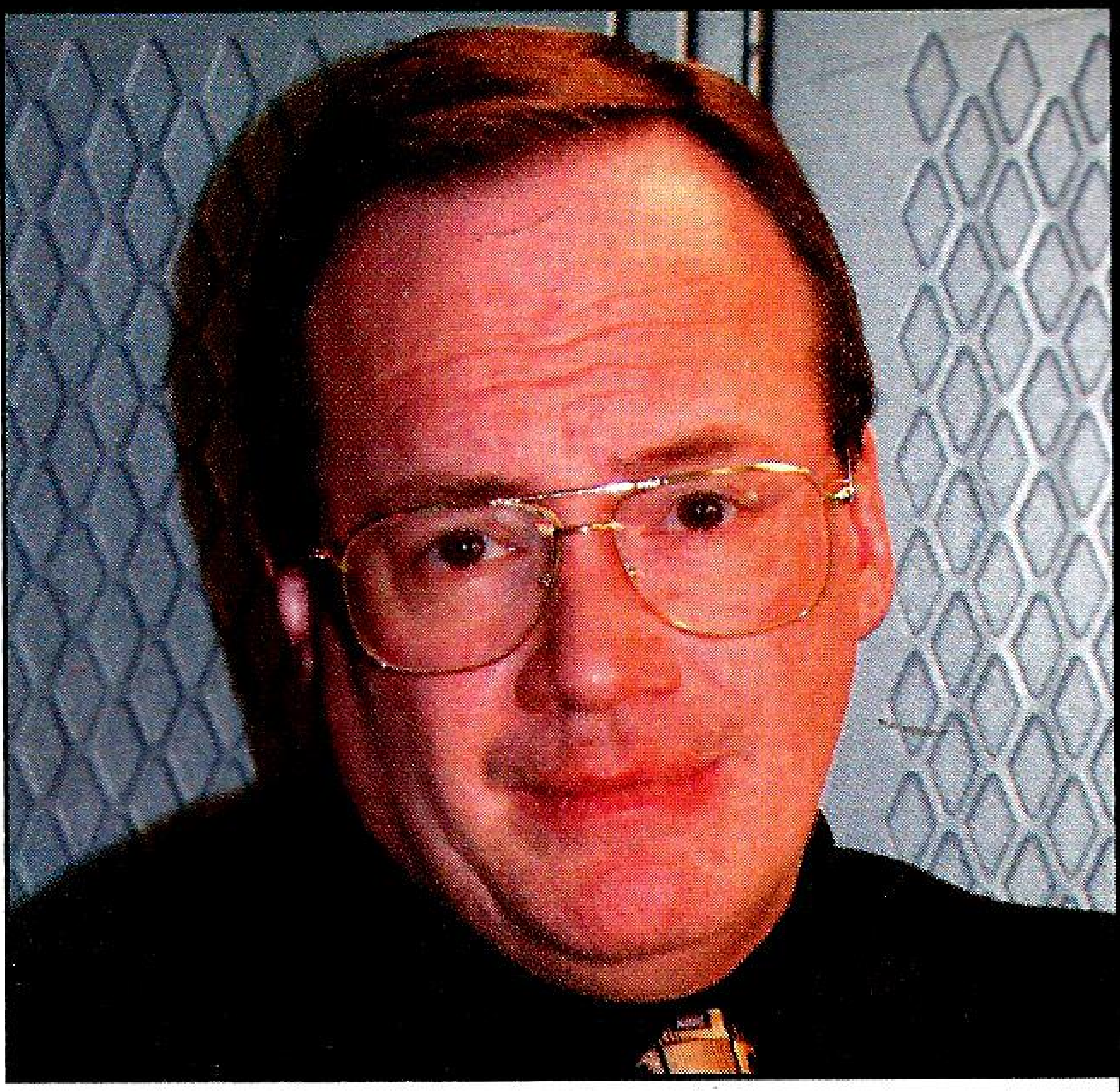
A: Nick Dinsmore was a great wrestler, a kid with a good body, dedicated. He could do anything you asked him to and could cut a pretty good promo. What do they do? They take him up and make him retarded Eugene. Rob Conway was a dedicated kid who would do anything for you, a good all-around worker. He had a cup of coffee. The Bashams were a really good team at a time when there weren't many good teams. They give them that giraffe, Linda Miles, as a dominatrix manager and had them lose every night. WWE ran them out, and now neither guy is hardly in the business.

It would literally take us three years to train guys, and it would take them three months to give them some stupid gimmick that would bury them with the fans. Then they'd fire them because they didn't get over. Matt Morgan, for crying out loud! The most athletic, youngest seven-footer that graduated college with a 3.4 GPA and can cut a hell of a promo. But because he wasn't somebody's political favorite, they bring him up and partner him with Big Show, the only human bigger than Matt. Then they sent him back down to developmental where he gets over again. They bring him back up, and they make him a stuttering buffoon! Put this as one of your headlines: WWE books wrestling based on what tickles Vince and the people on the writing team instead of what the fans want to see. It's the only business in the world where the people in the seats know more about what they want from the product than the people producing the product.

Q: You were fired as a WWE consultant after you slapped an OVW trainee who went on to become Santino Marella in an incident that involved The Boogeyman. Can you please tell me what really happened there?

A: Things were bubbling between WWE and me. I didn't

"I didn't get fired for slapping Santino Marella. I got fired because WWE had been trying to get me out of the way. That just gave them a good reason."

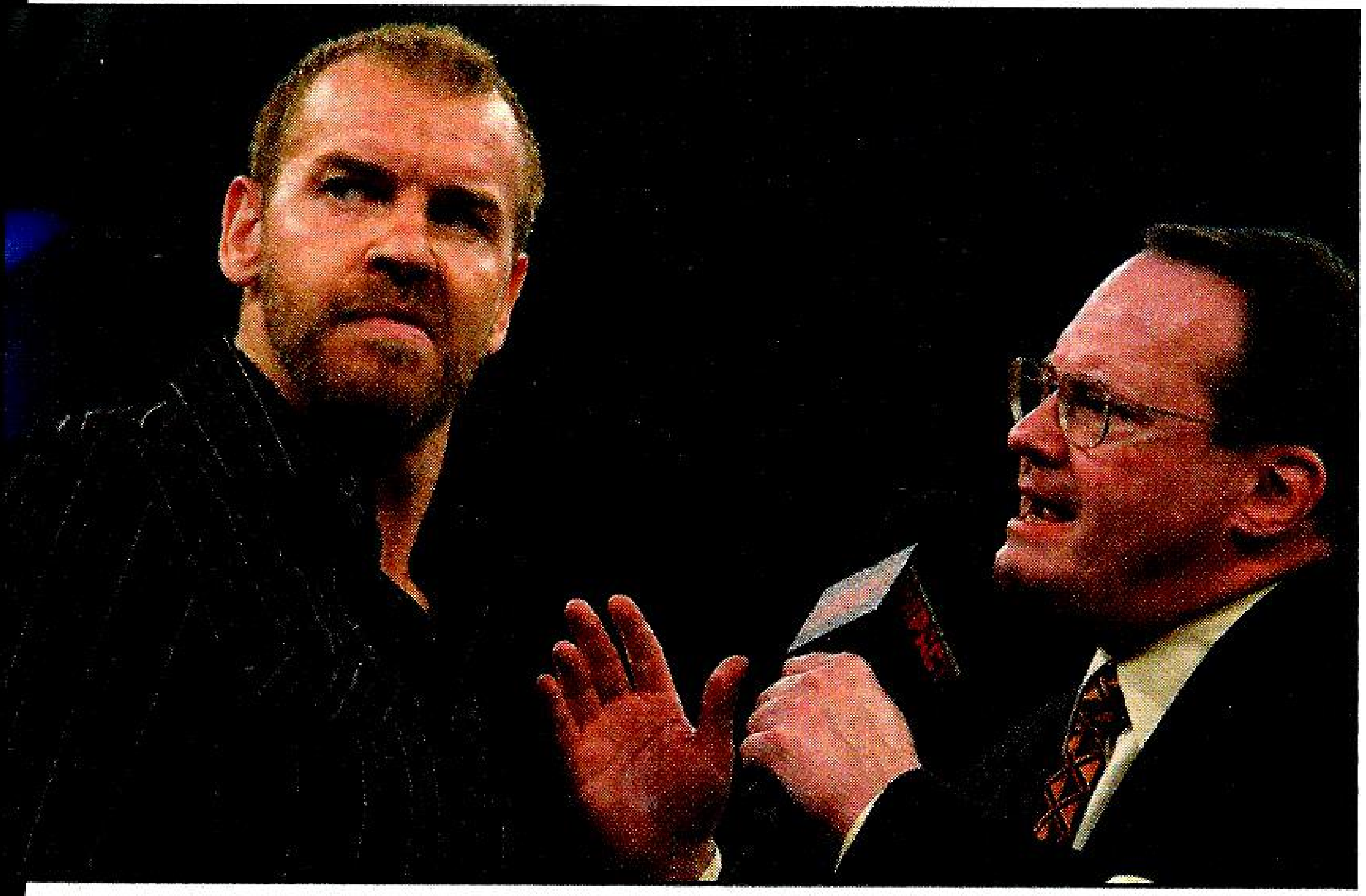


care what they did with their business, but we were running a business and we were contracted to provide them a service. They weren't paying all OVW's bills, not even most of them. They paid us a check for services rendered, they paid me as a consultant, but I was running a business of my own here in Louisville. The amount of control they wanted over my business was what we were having problems with. There had been an incident a couple months previous to this where I chewed out some of the talent they sent here. I chewed them out because they were screwing off and not taking my business seriously. Instead of taking my side, the WWE office took theirs. They wanted to get me out of the way so they could have things run the way they wanted, but they didn't want to buy the company from me. So they gave me a five-week paid vacation/suspension where I sat at home. I came back and three weeks later I'm trying to run a television program. We had our Six Flags live events coming up, which was a big source of income for the company. I find out I have Randy Orton booked for a date he isn't coming for, even though John Laurinaitis told me he was coming. Then he puts it on Tommy Dreamer, and Dreamer says Laurinaitis is lying. He forgot to tell Randy, and Randy had paid for a nonrefundable vacation. Now I've got to tell the people to whom I promised Orton that he isn't coming. I have to come up with something to make up for that. WWE is on the phone with me asking if Boogeyman is on TV. I say no because he had a skin infection and the doctor said he was contagious so we sent him home. "Well, can he do an interview?" No, we're not going to have him in our ring because he's contagious. "Is Maria on TV?" No, she's on tape because the last time we put her on live, she couldn't remember the guys' names. This is five o'clock the day of my show and they're trying to rewrite my TV from Connecticut. So I packed up my stuff and came home. I said, "Screw it, I quit."

Stacy, my girlfriend who is now my beloved wife, said to me, "You're letting the boys down, you're letting the fans down, and you're letting OVW down." She was right, so I went back that week. The next week, the first event, I have a guy in a dark match that WWE has sent down that I knew was awful. They insisted I put him on the show. He has a match that's so bad it hurts the fans' feelings. Then we start the program. I am expected to use Roadkill and Danny Doring. So I overcame my objection to actually booking somebody named "Roadkill" on my program because they insisted Vince liked that name. Of course, later they signed him and he changed it. In the second segment, I had to tell the people they weren't going to see Randy Orton. Then it was Maria in the pretape with her backstage interview with that vacant dumb act, which wasn't really much of an act at that point. As far as a television personality, she ain't no Diane Sawyer. Then here comes The Boogeyman.

Marty Wright was, to me, an exceptional talent. He was a tremendous promo and

Cornette's temper is on display as he tries to get at Bobby "The Brain" Heenan with his racket during a backstage skirmish. Cornette started carrying the racket to fight off unruly fans early in his career.



Cornette's role in TNA is that of an on-screen manager. Hard to tell if Christian Cage is shooting daggers at somebody in the crowd or expressing his real opinion of Cornette's advice.

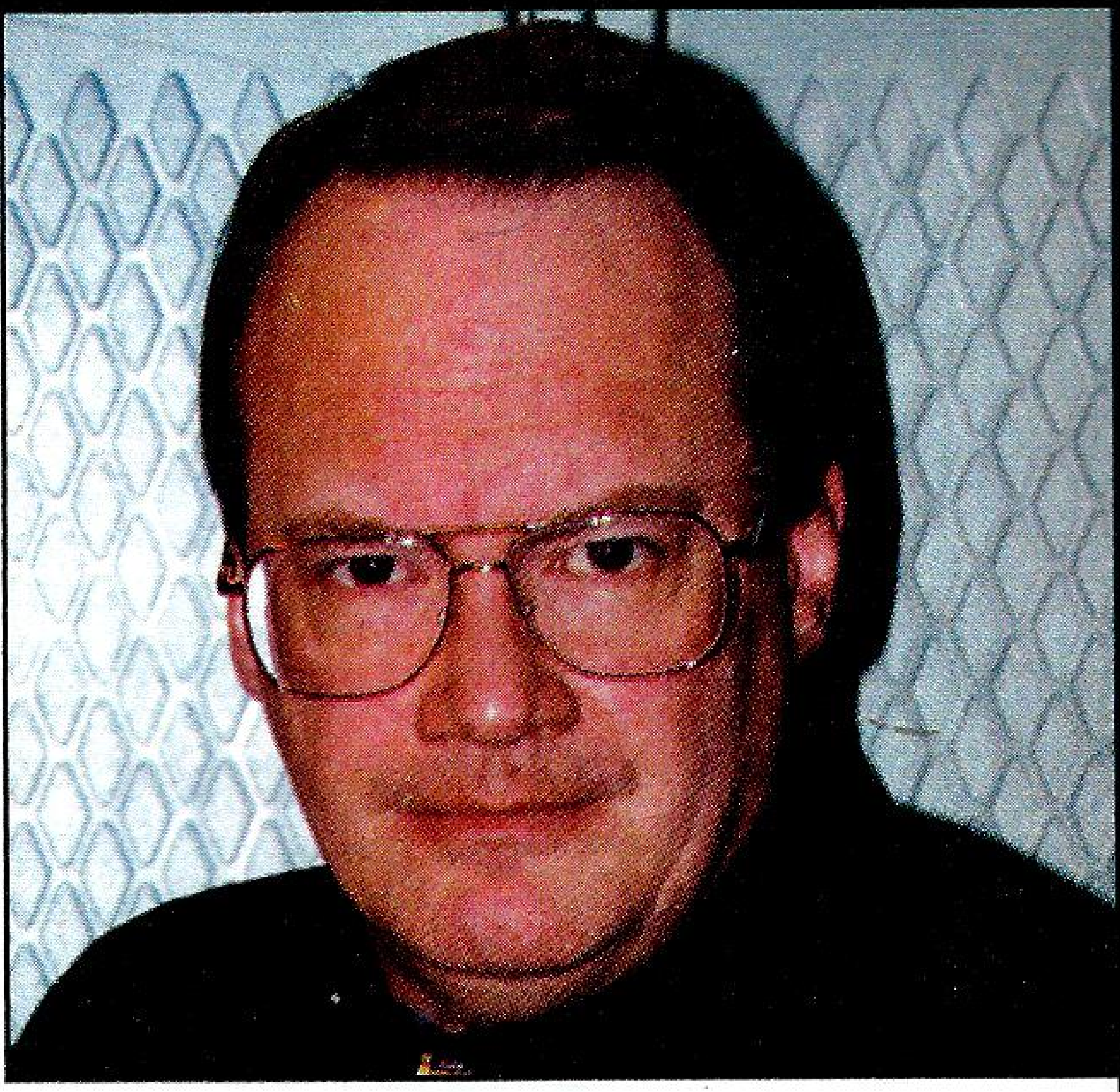
dedicated to the gimmick to the point where a psychiatrist could retire off the guy. He was an exceptional talent, but he had only had six weeks of training and they wanted me to put him on television and call him The Boogeyman. So I make the explanation to the fans that this guy legitimately believes he is The Boogeyman. We, of course, know that's ridiculous, but he's a mental case and he's had anger management issues, and if you see him anywhere around OVW property, do not approach him, because he is dangerous. During this match, The Boogeyman comes out from under the ring and scares the guys in the match off. He grabs the microphone and is going to cut a promo and then he's going to leave. He can't go back to the locker room because that would mean we had sanctioned his presence there, so he was going to go through the emergency exit on the side where our wrestling school students sit. And they'll run away from the guy. So he comes out. The wrestlers and referee run. He gets the microphone. Now he's wearing antlers and the antlers won't stay on his head. And he's got the voodoo stick that's supposed to be smoking and it isn't smoking real well. And he screws up the promo.

Another example of my television program—in which I took great pride—turned into crap in a handcart because of these guys in Connecticut who don't care if we make any money or not. When he leaves the ring, he goes over and the students run away, except for this one [expletive] who I'd never seen before. He just crosses his legs and laughs at The Boogeyman and won't get out of the way to let Boogeyman move the rail and get to the exit. Boogeyman shakes the rail, and hits the best friend of our local promoter down in Elizabethtown in the head with the rail. So I jump up and scream, "Get away from The Boogeyman!" The cameras are rolling. The fans are seeing this. "Get away from him! He's dangerous!"

So the guy gets up and Boogeyman gets out the door. I go to the back. I ask if that guy was one of ours. Yep, he is. Bring him back. He's this little round-faced, jacked up guy about six inches shorter than me. I ask him, "Why didn't you run?" And The Boogeyman is over my shoulder. He's looking at this guy like he wants to eat him for lunch. He said something, but I've got one bad ear so I said, "What?" And he leans up in my face and says, "No one told *me* anything about it." So now, not only do I have to clear my television with Vince, but I've got to clear it with an amateur class student! So I said, "I'm sorry," and I slapped the piss out of him. I said, "Did I tell you I was going to do that? No I didn't. But since I did it, why don't you sell it? You see this big, ugly mother running at you, and you don't want to get out of his way?" I slapped him forward and backward about five or six more times. "Now you're a tough guy. You're obviously not afraid of these big guys coming at you. So if you want to fight me, then there's the door to the parking lot, and we can go out and have a fight right now. You probably have a heck of a chance of whipping my ass." And I slapped him, forward and back, about four more times. "But if you don't want to fight me, then you had better run from *him*, because The Boogeyman will kill you. Now, tough guy, get out of my building."

He left and that's the last I've seen of him to this day. He thought he was going to be a little tough guy, so the most *un-tough* guy in the whole building had to slap him 16 times and ask him to step outside. He didn't do it. That means he couldn't dig-dog the kids in wrestling class and act like he was a tough shooter, because the middle-aged white guy just slapped him. That was a lesson in attitude. The Boogeyman probably would have killed him. I didn't get fired for slapping Santino Marella. I got fired because WWE had been trying to get me out of the way. That just gave them a good reason. Laurinaitis called me and said, "Jim, you can't slap a guy. This is a publicly traded company." And I said, "John, OVW ain't even a privately held company, and he ain't one of yours, he's one of our students." But he got a contract over that because they were so happy he gave them a reason to get rid of me. They didn't fire me from OVW. They fired me from a con-

"I still think that there is a style of professional wrestling that's treated as a sport and that's taken seriously. Not sports entertainment, but an entertaining sport.



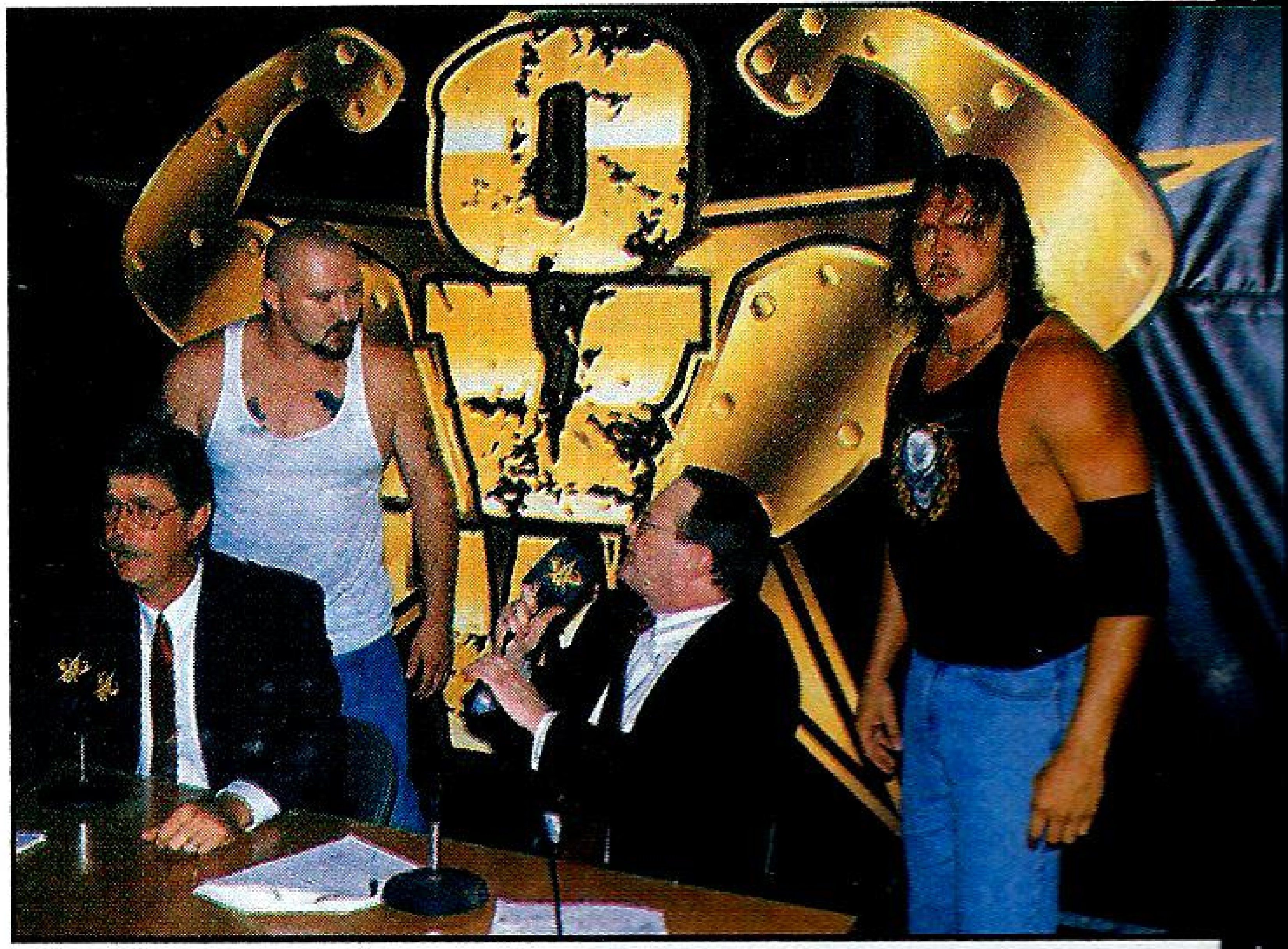
sultant position with WWE. They could not fire me from OVW. To keep OVW's relationship with WWE and so Danny Davis could still get his check, I stepped back from OVW. I knew it was a lost cause. I was either going to go to prison or I was going to have a heart attack. OVW was broken by these people in a year-and-a-half.

Q: Jim, we've talked a lot about the past, but you're still very active as the face of management on TNA. You're a guy who speaks his mind and you're working with some other outspoken and controversial people, such as the Jarretts, Scott D'Amore, Vince Russo, and Dutch Mantell. What has it been like going from being the guy calling the shots to being more of an on-screen character instead of the booker?

A: I went to Bookers Anonymous, a 12-step program. The first thing you learn is to answer every wrestling-related question with "I don't give a crap." In the past 19 years, I was on the WCW booking committee and Jim Herd drove me crazy, I wrote 200 hours of SMW TV and four years of live events, I worked on the WWF Creative team for two years until Vince Russo drove me crazy, then I came down to OVW and wrote 325 hours of television and six years of live events. I figure Stephen King is prolific, but screw him, nobody's got anything on me. I've done more hours of wrestling television in the past 15 years than anybody else in the business, except maybe Heyman, and at least he had post-production. I don't want to book.

Q: You're a wrestling traditionalist who prizes the importance of wrestling coming across as very real. When you watch some of the X division matches, where everything is so fast-paced and there's very little selling, does it drive you nuts? Do you think these guys don't understand the fundamentals or do you see this as being where the business is going and you have to adapt?

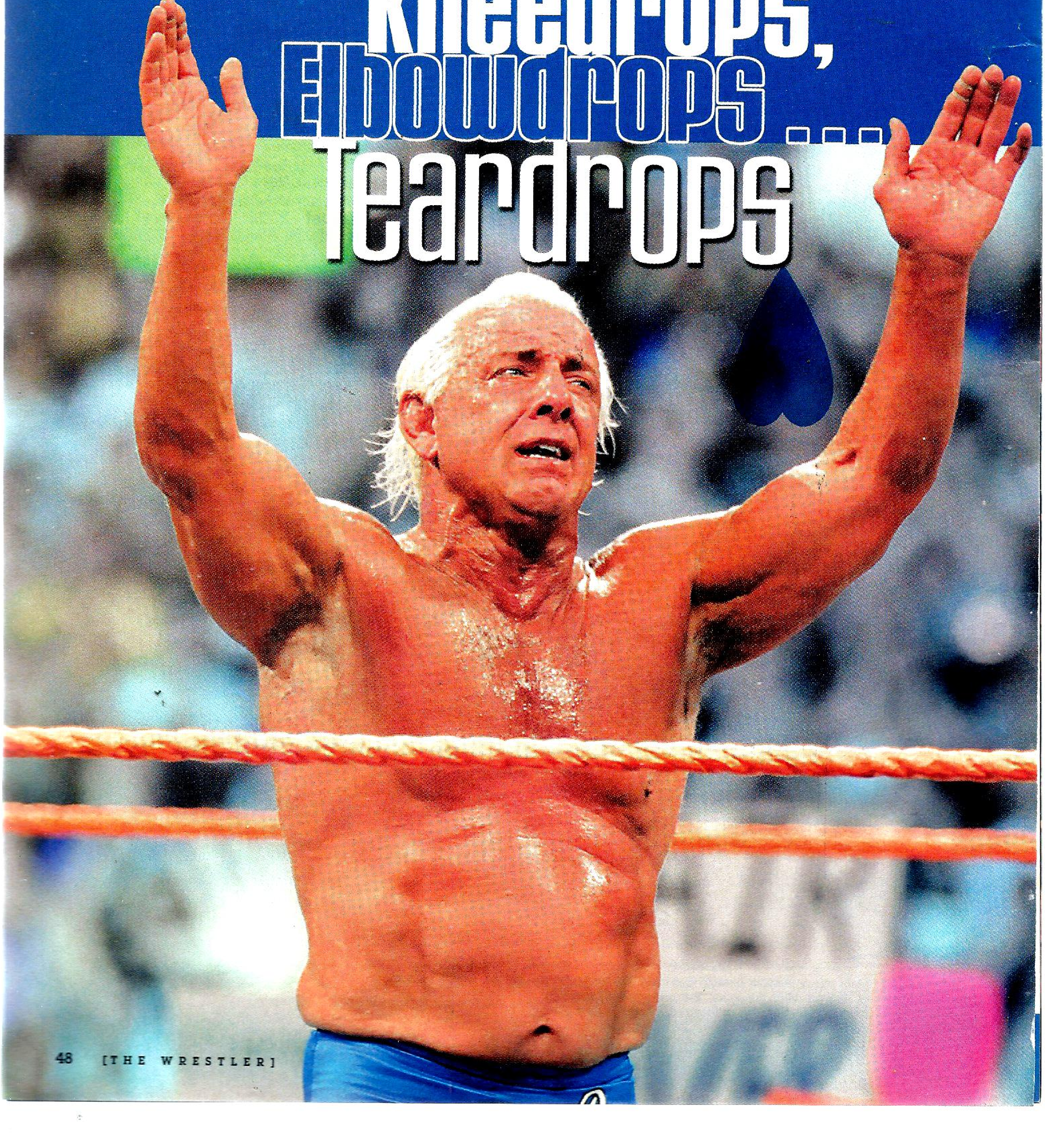
A: That is the style of wrestling these days. Rip Rogers, a great teacher in his own right, calls it "as seen on TV." The guys learn how to wrestle by watching other people who have jobs do it on TV. You can't tell them that what they're doing is wrong, because the guys who are making money and have the jobs they would like to have are doing it on TV. It feeds on itself. It's like nuclear disarmament. Unless everybody puts those nukes away, it's hard to make the case to one country. I still think that there is a style of professional wrestling that's treated as a sport that's taken seriously. Not sports entertainment, but an entertaining sport. I have it in my head. With a budget, I could probably produce it, but it would be a lot more work and stress on my blood pressure than a man of my advanced age of almost 47 should do. It would require the complete re-education of the audience. It would work eventually, and you would see a lot more buy rates and ratings than any other promotion, because it would be engendering emotion. But it's so radically different from what the business is now, maybe its better I never try it because I might put somebody out of business and turn the whole ship in a different direction. □



Over the past 15 years, nobody has created more televised wrestling than Cornette, who chats it up on the OVW set with commentator Dean Hill. According to Cornette, only Heyman comes close.

Even with three nights to do it, WWE had quite the challenge in finding a way to pay fitting tribute to perhaps the greatest wrestler ever. But it did a magnificent job honoring Ric Flair during WrestleMania weekend ... and Flair delivered a memorable 'Mania moment for the books

Kneedrops, Elbowdrops ... Teardrops



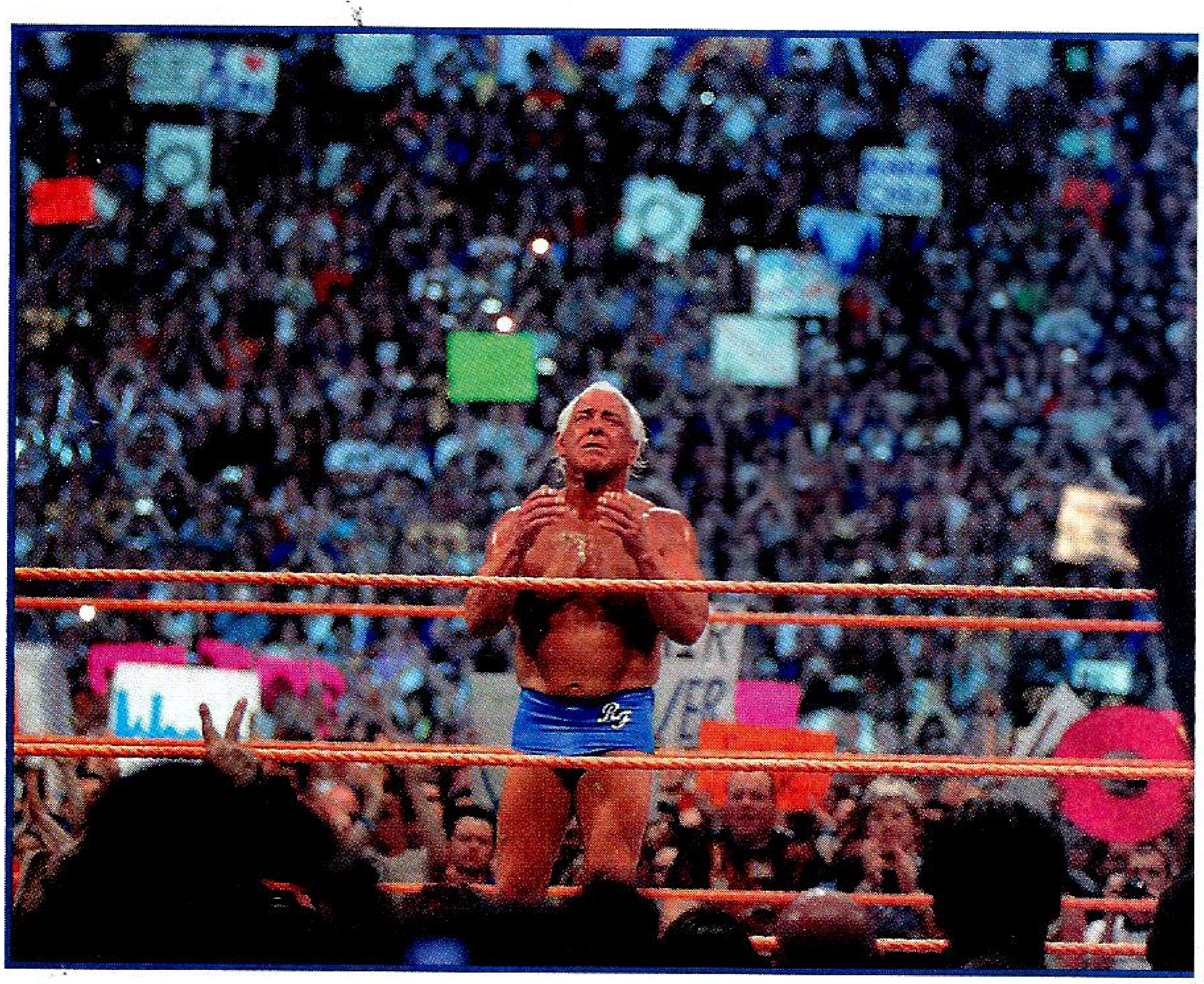
FLAIR LEAVES HIS HEART IN ORLANDO

BY DAVE LENKER
PHOTOS BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

IT'S ALREADY BEEN called—by some who have seen virtually all there is to see in this sport/business—the *greatest* thing they've ever witnessed, the most moving scene in wrestling history, a simply wonderful outpouring of raw emotion, the kind of bittersweet night that moved rooms full of grown, manly men to tears, and so forth. Funny thing is, these descriptions are worthy of any one of three consecutive nights at the end of March, but they really apply to all three taken together as a whole.

WrestleMania weekend. Ric Flair's retirement weekend.

Not many wrestlers are worthy of a retirement *weekend* on such a grand stage. But no professional wrestler who has ever lived or who ever will be born is or will ever be quite like Ric Flair.



WrestleMania 24 weekend was one of tears for Ric Flair, who bid farewell to in-ring competition after a losing effort to Shawn Michaels. Despite the loss, Flair was given a fitting sendoff.

Hulk Hogan was far more popular in the mainstream. Steve Austin drew far more money at the box office during his best years. The Rock transcended wrestling like no other man. Kurt Angle won an Olympic gold medal as an amateur wrestler and has been arguably even better in the pro ranks.

But there was something about Ric Flair that made him more special than all of them.

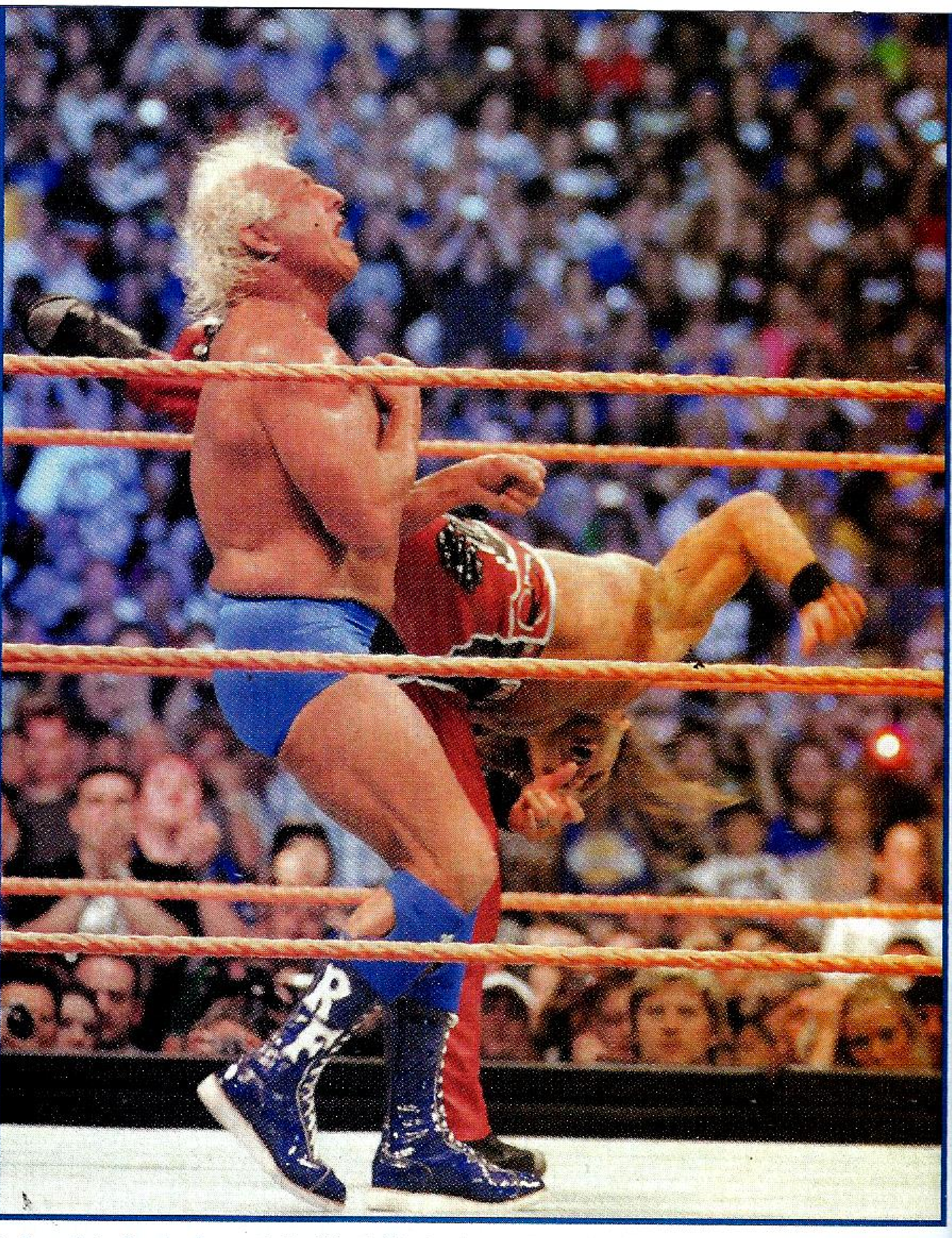
After 36 glorious years, Flair has finally left the ring after truly giving everything he had mentally, physically, and most importantly, emotionally. When the entire WWE roster paid public tribute to Flair at the end of Raw on March 31, you got the feeling he just didn't have any more tears left to cry.

So 14 years after he dropped a retirement match to Hulk Hogan in WCW (you remember WCW—stipulations rarely meant anything in that company), Flair lost his final bout to Shawn Michaels cleanly in the middle of the ring at WrestleMania 24 at the Citrus Bowl in Orlando, and you got the feeling this really was it this time, that the dirtiest player in the game won't try to hoodwink anyone and make a comeback. The Black Scorpion won't be donning the mask again. As much as part of every one of us will want to see a scenario in which he'll pull on the tights one more time for the perfectly set up grudge match, he'll resist the urge.

But *wow*. What an exit.

Come on now, you knew how it would end months ago when, after Flair returned to WWE TV following a brief hiatus and Mr. McMahon immediately told him he was done as soon as he lost a singles match. You knew you wouldn't be thumbing through the pages of this magazine on a lazy afternoon to discover that the "Nature Boy's" career had come to an end when he was pinned by Kenny Dykstra on the mid-card of a Sunday afternoon house show at a half-full arena in Albuquerque.

You put it together quickly and realized WrestleMania wasn't that far off, and that's where it would all end. The only question was who would do it. Triple-H was a popular choice, but Shawn Michaels was the perfect choice.



In the anticipation leading up to the WrestleMania "Career-Threatening" match, some thought the "Nature Boy" might be able to defeat Michaels and survive another day. But Michaels' superkick guaranteed Flair's retirement—a retirement that seems more permanent than Flair's previous respites from the ring.

You tried to force yourself to believe, even on WrestleMania eve, as Flair was being inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame and trying to talk about the match with HBK as if the outcome were in doubt, that it might not end just yet, but you knew better. Your brain trumped your heart. It was the right time and the right occasion. It was time for Flair to go. Social Security is but a handful of years away. His body couldn't hide that fact anymore, and quite frankly, neither could his performances in the ring. But this was a weekend to celebrate all that was great about Ric Flair.

And *wow*. What a celebration.

Although he was only a 20-minute man and not the legendary 60- or even 90-minute man he had been in his prime, the match with Michaels was pretty amazing. Technically imperfect for damn sure, but also magically memorable from the opening bell until Flair made his way back down the aisle as a wrestler for the final time. Imperfect was just fine. Flair was never about technical perfection from move to move and hold to hold. He was more about the performance as a whole.

Part of what made the match so special was that Flair didn't do anything unusual. He didn't attempt any moves that his body let him know years ago that he could not—or should not—do, and he didn't show any respect to an opponent whom, truth be told, he respected as much as anyone in the sport. Flair wouldn't be Flair if he didn't play dirty, so why would he be anything but filthy in his final bout? Low blows, cheap shots—heck, he even used the referee (fittingly, Charles Robinson, who once adopted a "Lil' Naitch" persona in WCW) as a shield one last time.

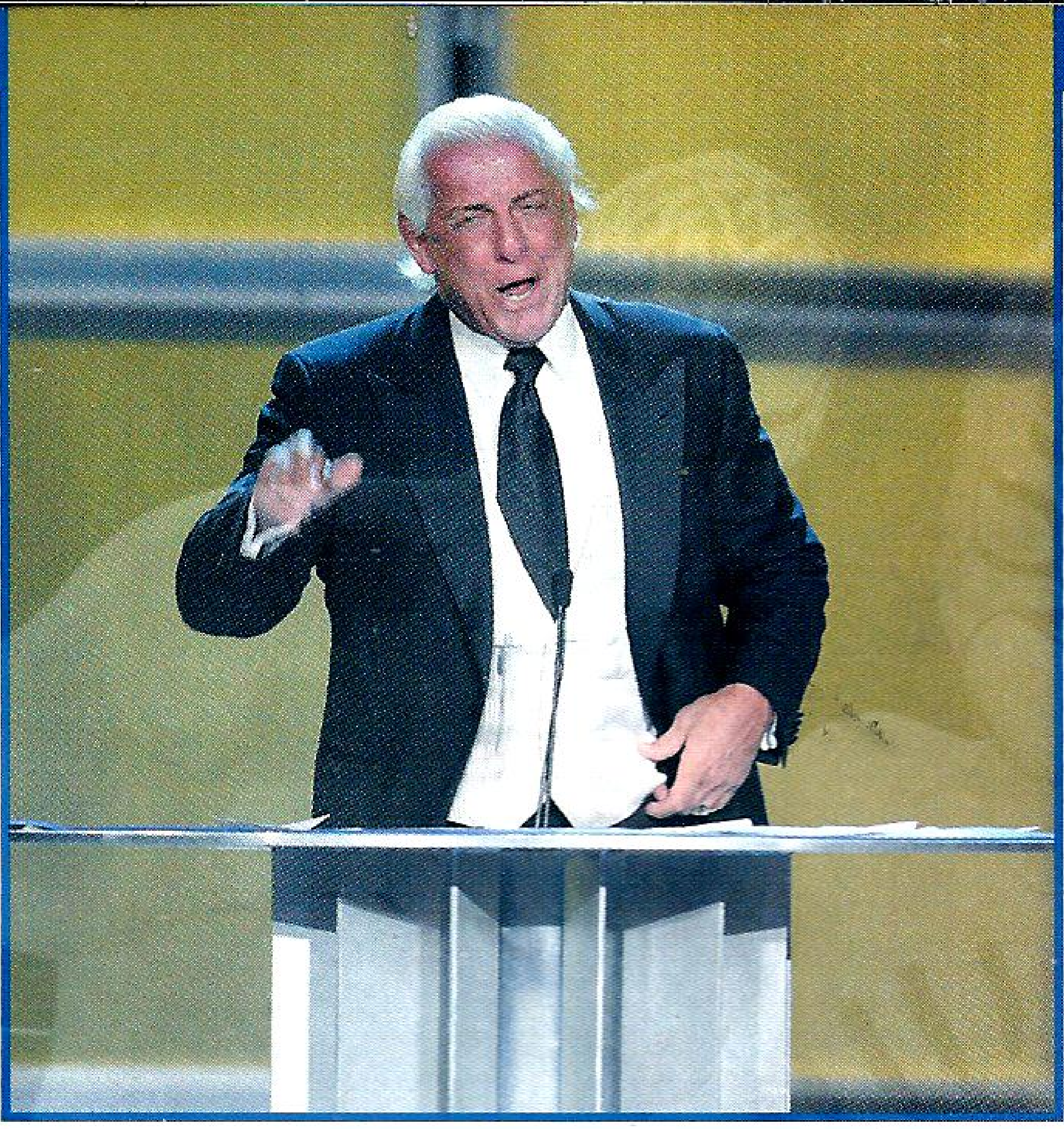
But the end was still inevitable. Michaels apologized, even told Flair, "I love you" before unleashing a superkick to end perhaps the most glorious run in a sport dating back to the days of Abraham Lincoln.

Twenty-four hours earlier, of course, Flair shed his first public tears of the weekend during the Hall of Fame ceremony. He cried, The Big Show cried, other WWE stars and employees cried, his wife, Tiffany, cried, and his sons and daughters cried. Maybe even his two ex-wives, whom he classily thanked in his acceptance speech, watched and cried at home. Flair went on seemingly forever, but some in attendance would later say they would have sat there and listened to him all night and early-morning long.

"I hope nobody ever went home feeling bad about spending money to see Ric Flair," he said in one of a dozen memorable lines.

Only the nervous WWE TV crew begged him to wrap it up so they'd have time to edit the ceremony for a tape-delay broadcast on the USA Network. Flair finally took the hint from his buddy Triple-H.

Twenty-four hours *after* losing to Michaels, of course, Flair had the tear ducts fully replenished as WWE paid tribute to him again, this time, live on Raw. The main event spot of the show was reserved for Flair. No big match and no storyline advancement whatsoever. Just a genuine show of WWE Nation's utmost respect and admiration.



Leading up to the 'Mania match, Flair's retirement began to seem more and more imminent. His Hall of Fame induction speech sounded eerily like a farewell speech, even though Flair had not yet wrestled HBK.

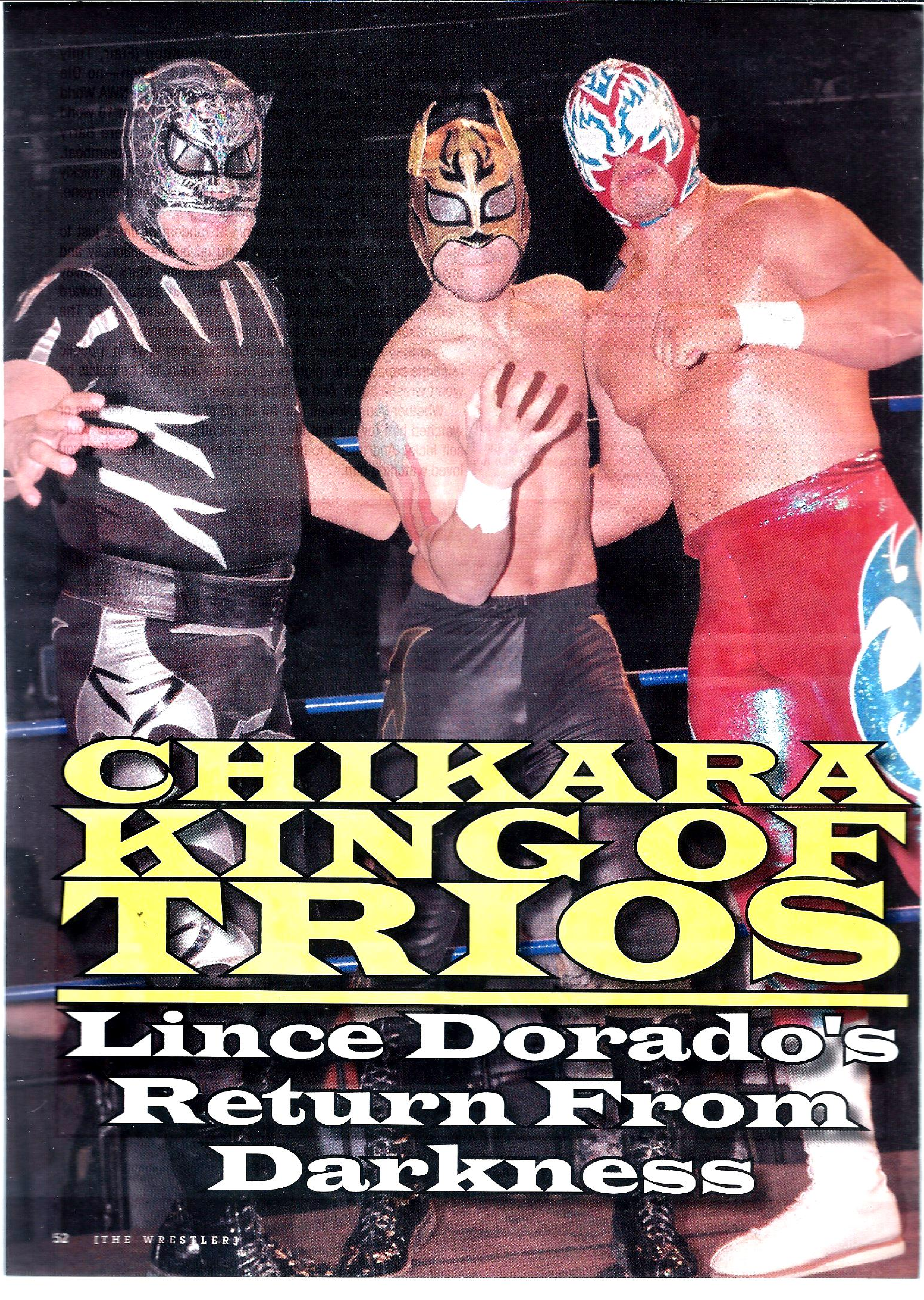
The original Four Horsemen were reunited (Flair, Tully Blanchard, Arn Anderson, and manager J.J. Dillon—no Ole Anderson or Lex Luger) for a few moments. Eight-time NWA World champion Harley Race, the man Flair beat for his first of 16 world titles a quarter-century ago, was there, too. So were Barry Windham, Greg Valentine, Dean Malenko, and Rick Steamboat. The entire locker room eventually came out as well. Flair quickly teared up again. So did his family. So did just about everyone. Chants of "Thank you, Ric!" grew louder.

Flair hugged everyone, seemingly at random at times just to have someone to whom he could hang on both emotionally and physically. When the cameras stopped rolling, Mark Calaway came out to the ring, dropped to a knee, and gestured toward Flair in signature "Dead Man" pose. Yet he wasn't really The Undertaker then. This was beyond wrestling personas.

And then it was over. Flair will continue with WWE in a public relations capacity. He might even manage again, but he insists he won't wrestle again. And so it truly is over.

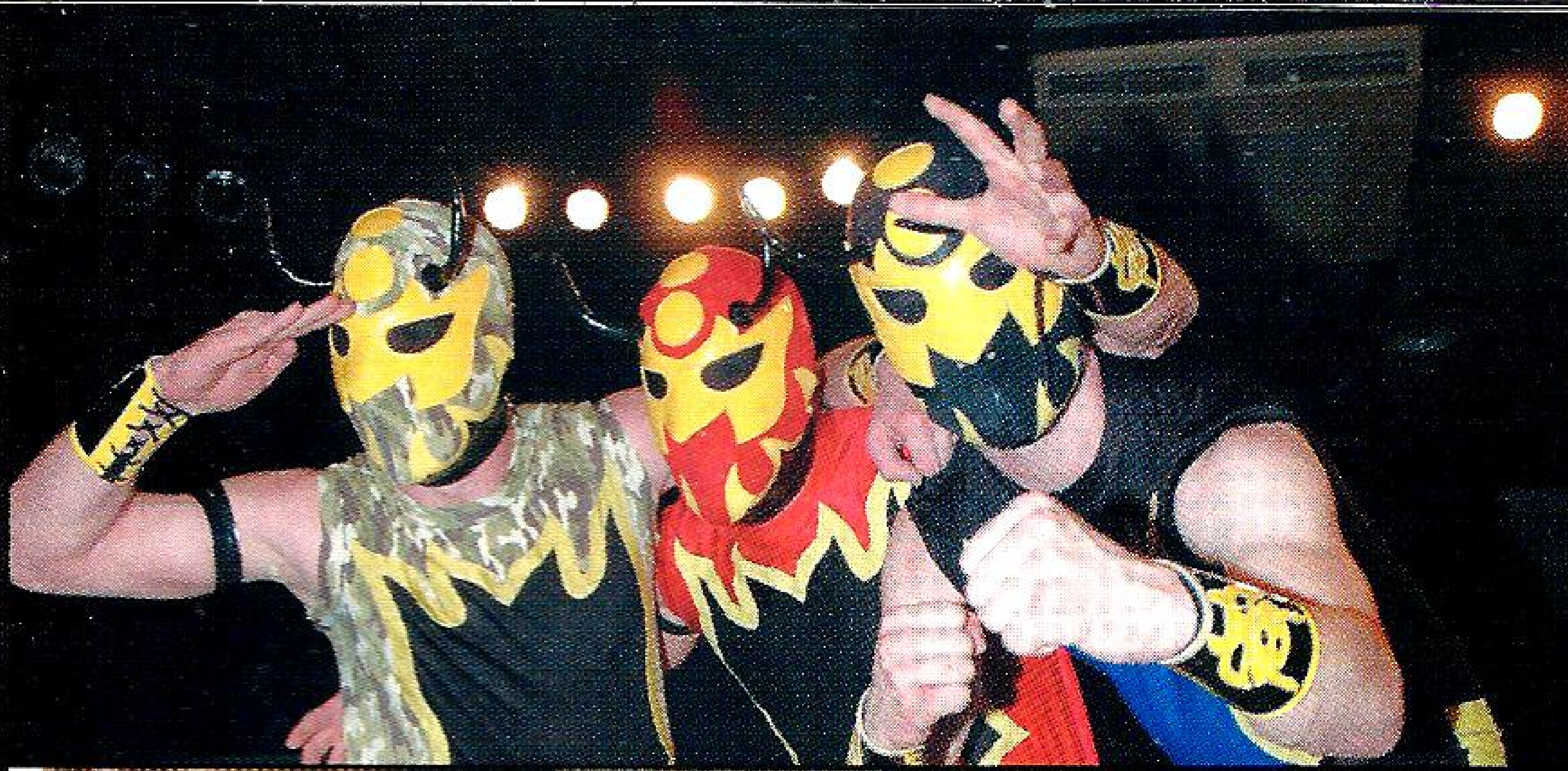
Whether you followed him for all 36 of his years in the ring or watched him for the first time a few months back, consider yourself lucky. And take it to heart that he feels even luckier that you loved watching him. ☐

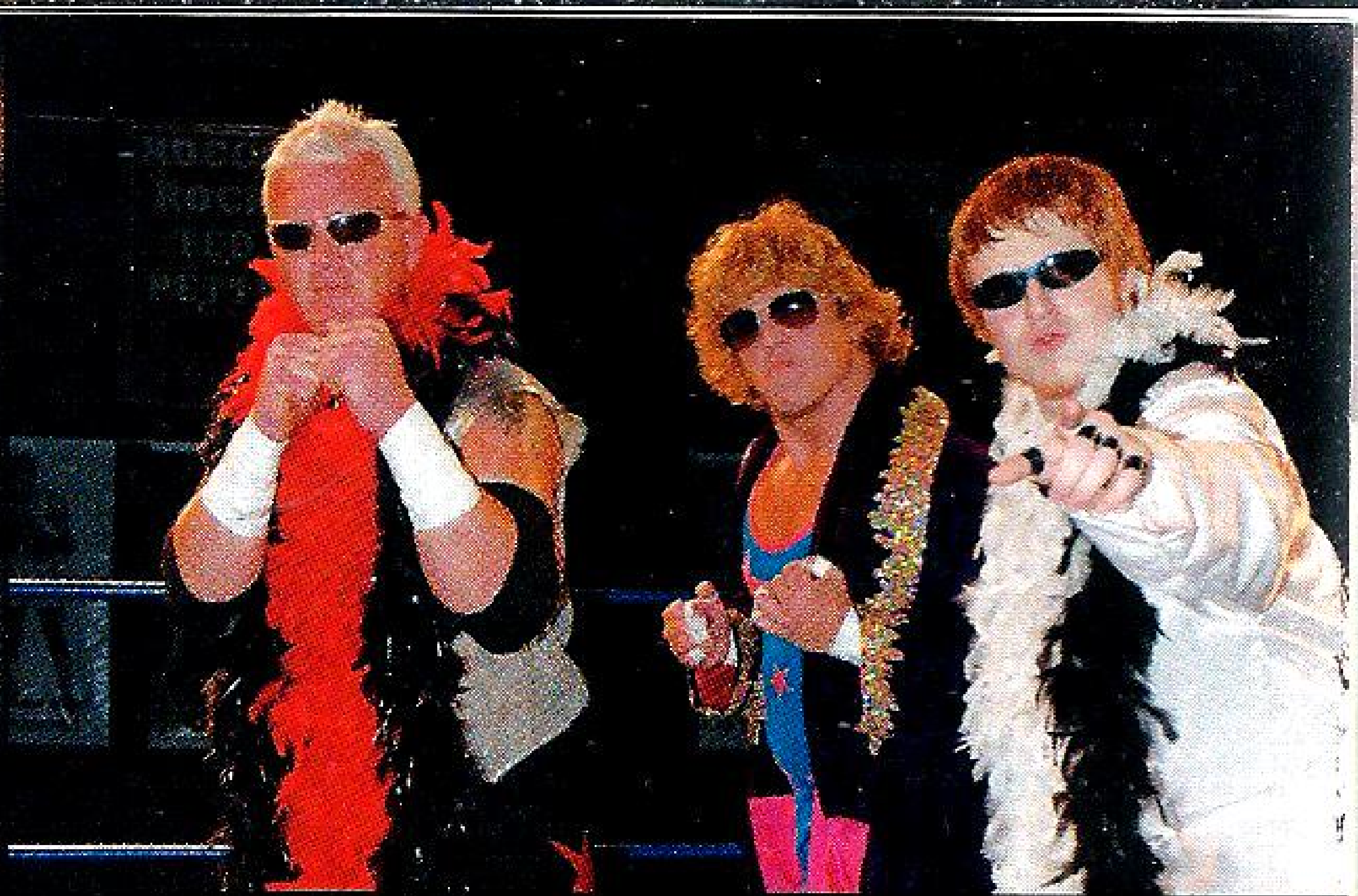
"The Dirtiest Player In The Game" lived up to his name at WrestleMania, victimizing HBK with a few cheap shots during his final match. Perhaps the greatest wrestler of all-time, "Naitch" delivered a classic on the way out.

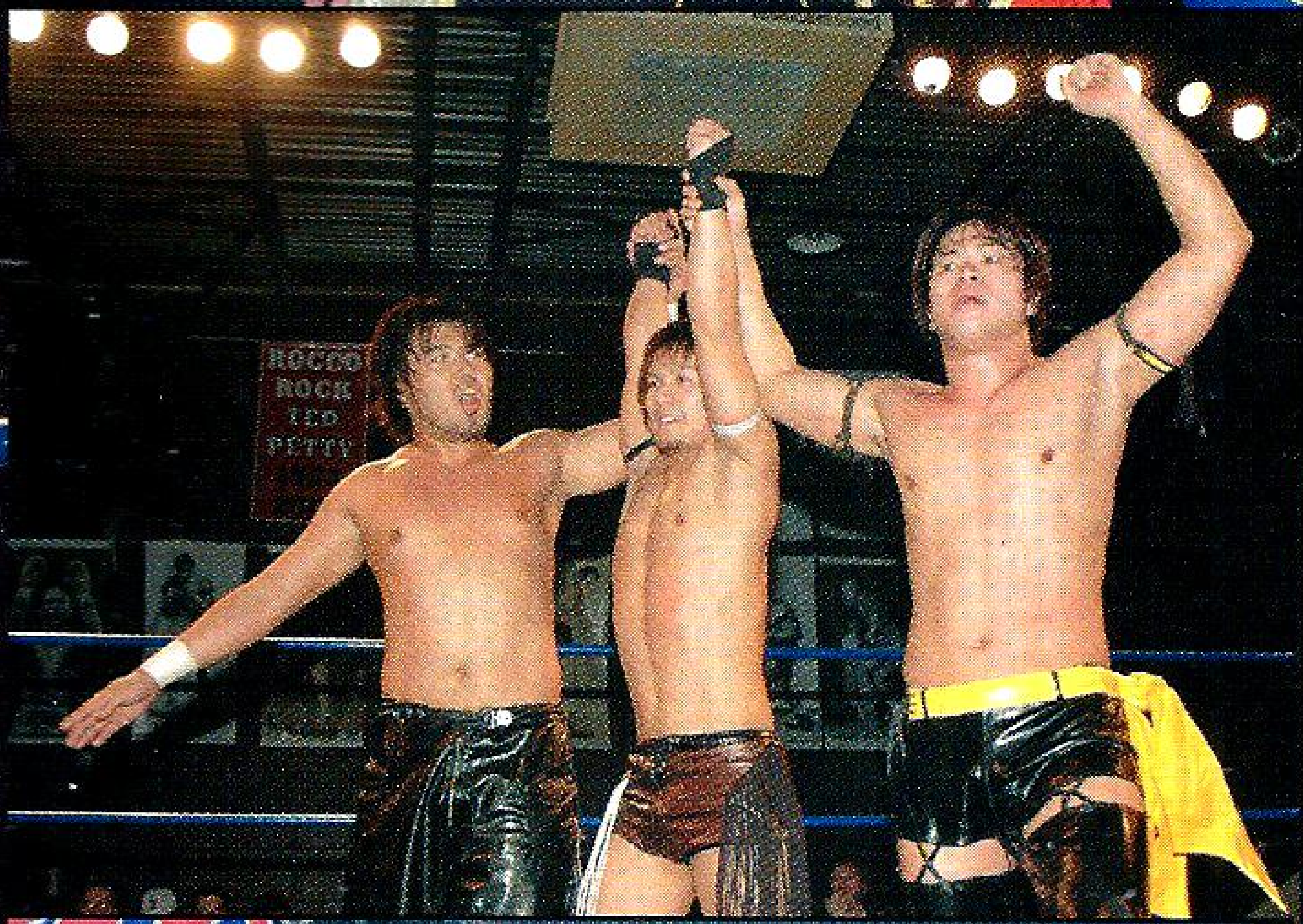


CHIKARA KING OF TRIOS

Lince Dorado's Return From Darkness







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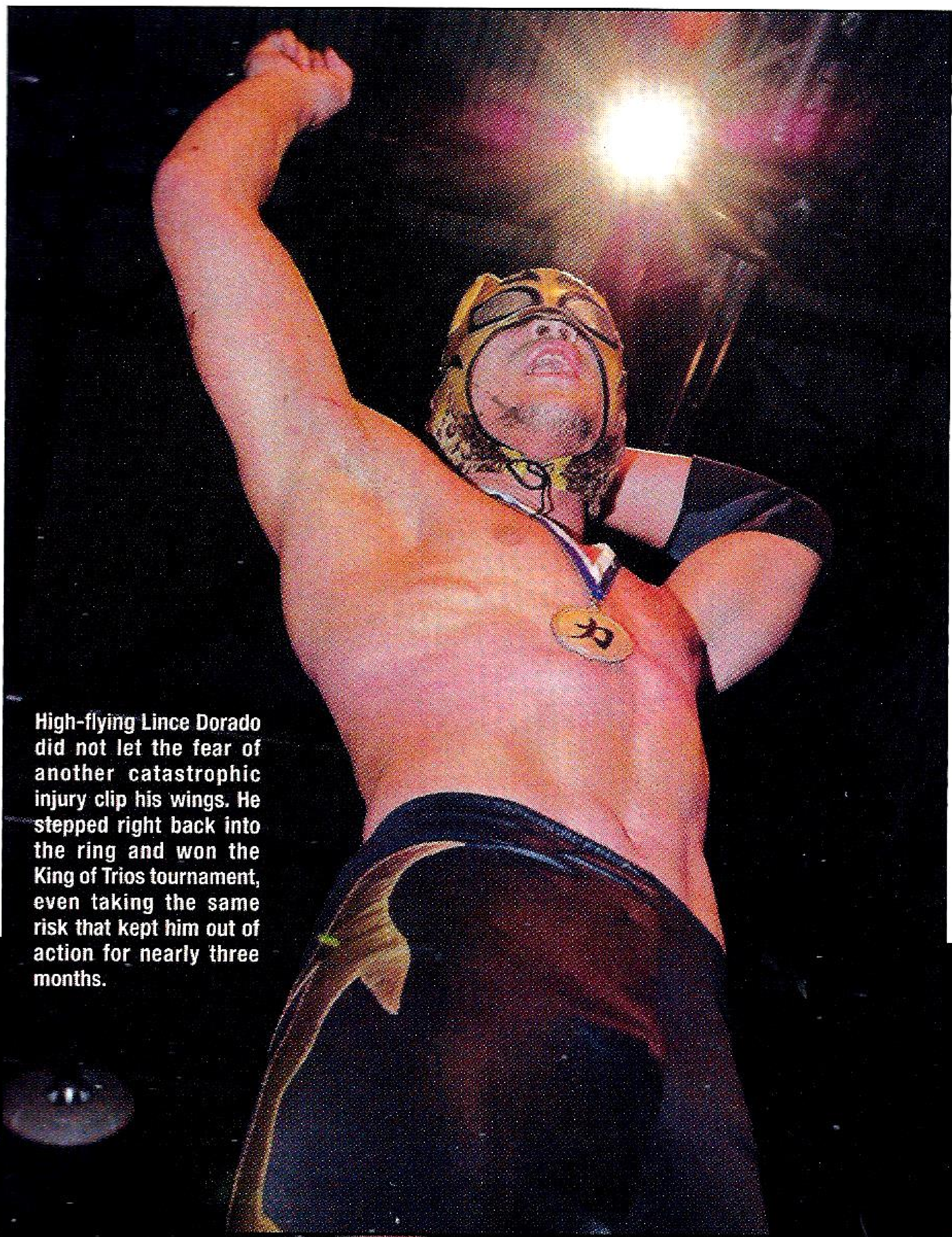
Chikara

CHIKARA's 2008 King of Trios card in Philadelphia treated fans and competitors alike to a spectacle they will not soon forget ... and a memory tournament co-winner Lince Dorado was thankful to experience

BY BRADY HICKS
PHOTOS BY JOE ZANOLLE

IN THE CLOSING seconds of CHIKARA's annual King of Trios 2008 tournament, Lince Dorado found himself standing on the top rope looking down at BLACKOUT's Eddie Kingston. While ordinarily Dorado would not hesitate to leap, this was no normal case. Dorado's thoughts kept returning to an incident that occurred only months earlier.

It was back in November 2007 that Dorado very nearly lost his life during a CHIKARA match in that very same ring.

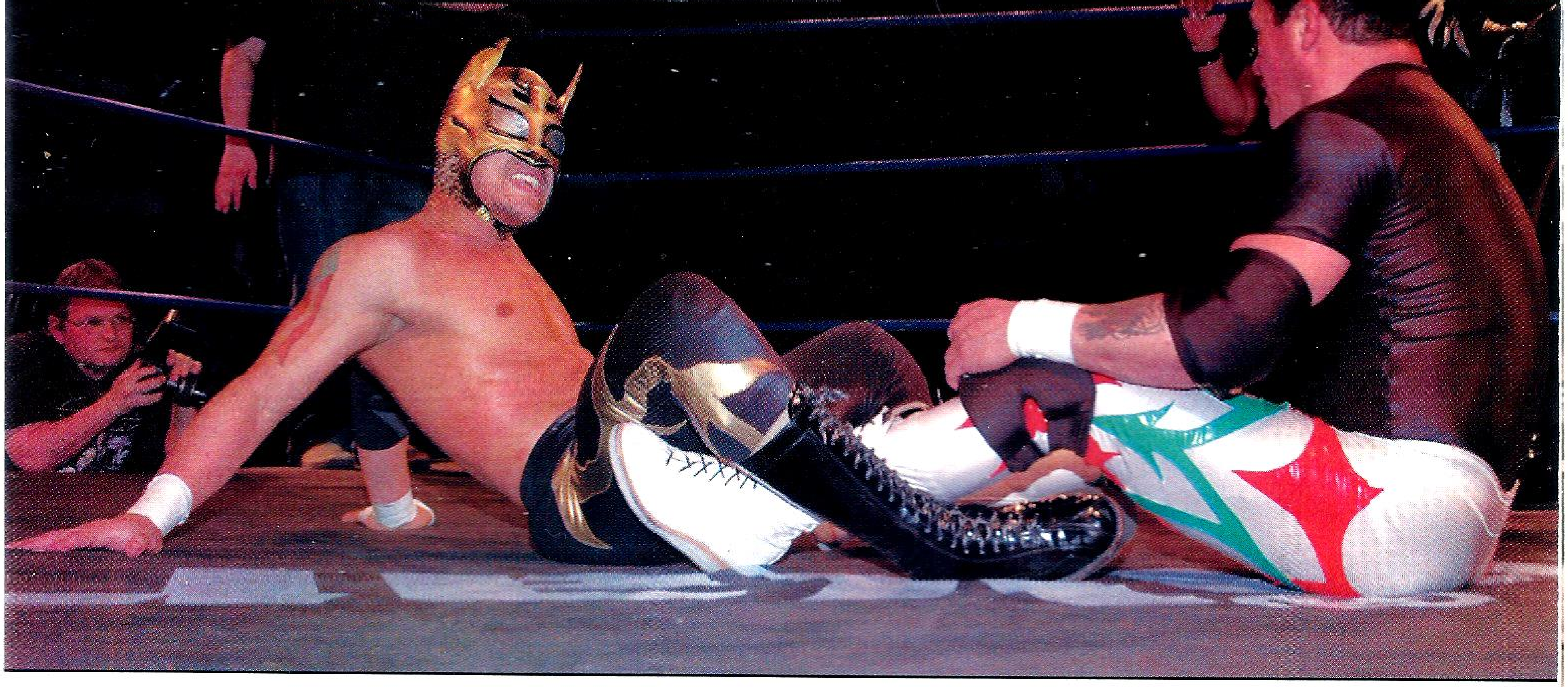


High-flying Lince Dorado did not let the fear of another catastrophic injury clip his wings. He stepped right back into the ring and won the King of Trios tournament, even taking the same risk that kept him out of action for nearly three months.

Dorado's opponent that day was Mitch Ryder, a man who had stirred his anger with the false accusation that the Mexican sensation was indeed an illegal alien. The stakes were set for the grudge match, with Ryder's hair being put up against Dorado's mask. After a tough give-and-take brawl, Dorado was one move away from victory. That could have been the last move Dorado ever made in a wrestling ring.

Lince had performed the ultra-dangerous shooting star senton bomb numerous times without incident. This time, unfortunately, the odds caught up to him. Dorado turned his shoulder a little too far—and slammed down headfirst and hard onto his opponent. The crowd stared on, open-mouthed and with heads shaking.

As Dorado lay unable to move, his body began convulsing. Medical personnel tried to fight Dorado's seizure, and it quickly became apparent that a nasty, career-threatening tumble might have actually become more of a life-threatening fall. The locker room emptied and concern for their comrade eclipsed any thoughts of the match's outcome.



Last year, Jorge Rivera, shown here against Dorado, eliminated Dorado's team. Rivera's teammate and CHIKARA trainer Mike Quackenbush says there was no shame in being eliminated by Los Luchadores this year.

KING OF TRIOS 2008 RESULTS

NIGHT ONE

Round One

Las Chivas Rayadas (Chiva II, Chiva III, &Chiva IV) defeated Team Ring of Honor (Shane Hagadorn, Rhett Titus, & Alex Payne) ... The Colony (Fire Ant, Worker Ant, & Soldier Ant) beat Team El Dorado (Shimizu, Go, & Michael Nakazawa) ... The Order of the Neo Solar Temple (UltraMantis Black, Hydra, & Crossbones defeated The Sea Amigos (Call-Me-Kevin, Unibouzu, & D.W. Cycloptopuss III) ... Mike Quackenbush, Shane Storm, & Jorge Rivera beat Team Egypt (Mecha Mummy, Ophidian, & Amasis) ... Team WTF (Cheech, Cloudy, & m.c. KZ) defeated Brodie Lee, Jimmy Olsen, & Retail Dragon ... Team IPW: UK (Martin Stone, Terry Frazier, & Sha Samuels) beat The Naptown Dragons (Drake Younger, Dustin Lee, & Scotty Vortekz)

Team BLACKOUT (Ruckus, Joker, & Eddie Kingston) and Incohelios (Hallowicked, Delirious, & Helios) received byes into the second round

Round Two

The Colony defeated Las Chivas Rayadas ...Team BLACKOUT beat The Order of the Neo Solar Temple ... Mike Quackenbush, Shane Storm, & Jorge Rivera defeated Team WTF ... Inohelios beat Team IPW: UK

NIGHT TWO

Round One

Team DDT (Miyawak, Susumu, & Kudo) defeated The Southern Saints (Shaun Reed, Reno Diamond, & Marcus O'Neill) ... Da Soul Touchaz (Willie Richardson, Acid Jaz, & Marshe Rockett) beat Team BSE (Kobra Kai, Super Xtremo, & Sombra Canadienese) ... The Kings of Wrestling (Icarus, Gran Akuma, & Chuck Taylor) defeated Sweet 'n' Sour Inc. (Bobby Dempsey, Sara Del Rey, & Tank Toland) ... Mitch Ryder, Larry Sweeney, & Shayne Hawke beat Team Stranglehold (Tim Donst, Drew Gulak, & Andy Sumner) ... Team IWS (El Generico, Player Uno, & Stupified) defeated The First Family (Arik Cannon, Darin Corbin, & Ryan Cruz) ... Los Luchadores de Mexico (Lince Dorado, Incognito, & El Pantera) beat Los Ice Creams & Glacier ... Team AZW (AkuA, Immortal Black, & Immortal White) and Team WWF (One Man Gang & Demolition) received byes into the second round.

Round Two

Team DDT defeated Team AZW ... The Kings of Wrestling beat Da Soul Touchaz ... Mitch Ryder, Larry Sweeney, & Shayne Hawke defeated Team WWF ... Los Luchadores de Mexico beat Team IWS

NIGHT THREE

Quarterfinal Round

The Colony defeated The Kings of Wrestling ... Los Luchadores de Mexico beat Mike Quackenbush, Shane Storm, and Jorge Rivera ... Team BLACKOUT defeated Team DDT ... Incohelios beat Mitch Ryder, Larry Sweeney, & Shayne Hawke

Semifinal Round

Team BLACKOUT defeated Incohelios ... Los Luchadores de Mexico beat The Colony

Final Round

Los Luchadores de Mexico defeated Team BLACKOUT

As Dorado was carried away, Ryder honored the match stipulations by getting his head shaved. But lingering worry about Dorado's welfare sucked the charm out of the event, which was soon cancelled.

"I remember being fully conscious of what was going on, but I couldn't get my body to respond," recalled Dorado. "After I landed, I tried to grab my head, but I couldn't even get my arms to move. That's when things started to go black. In the locker room, I tried to tell them what happened, but I couldn't even open my mouth. It was the scariest experience in my life, by far."

In the back, those watching on the monitors were amazed Dorado was even alive, much less conscious. The luchador was rushed immediately to Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in Center City Philly, where he was diagnosed with a severe concussion and head trauma.

In addition to months of headaches, Dorado was also left legally blind in both eyes. While most of the vision in his right eye returned in a few days, his left eye is believed to have suffered irreparable damage.

In spite of the vision loss, though, Lince Dorado was able to see one thing nobody could have ever predicted: his return.

In the midst of an ongoing sixth-month evaluation with doctors, Dorado came back to the New Alhambra Arena to a standing ovation at CHIKARA's King of Trios tournament on February 29, 2008. That night he teamed with fellow luchadores Incognito and El Pantera, joining the field of 28 three-man tag teams competing in the annual tournament.

"At first, my family hated the idea of me coming back," said Dorado. "But I had to do it anyway. There was a lot of emotion, especially since I was coming back to the place where that awful injury occurred."

"Getting to see Lince and his mentor, El Pantera, as well as Incognito, come back was an awesome sight," said CHIKARA executive Leonard F. Chikarason. "With the year Lince had, especially at the New Alhambra Arena, it was very emotional."

The tourney began for the luchadores with a match against the popular CHIKARA team of Los Ice Creams and a mystery partner, later revealed to

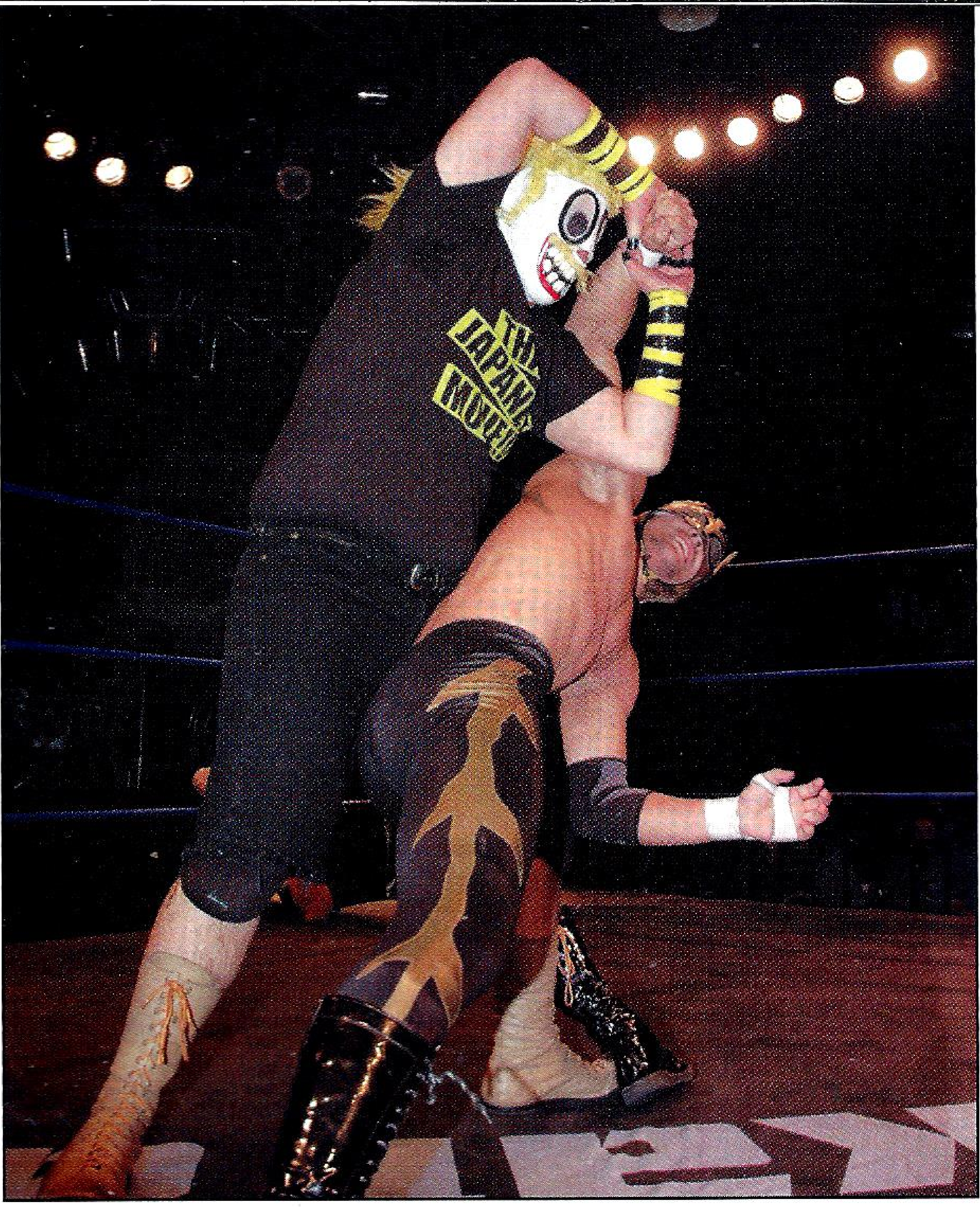
be former WCW star Glacier. Dorado delivered a moonsault press on Ice Cream Jr., enabling his team to move on. Next up were International Wrestling Syndicate stars El Generico, Player Uno, and Stupefied. Incognito pinned Stupefied to advance to the next day's quarterfinals.

This would be a very tough matchup, with Mike Quackenbush, Shane Storm (both returning King of Trios champions), and Jorge Rivera the clear favorites. But El Pantera scored the pin, rolling up Quackenbush in a la placenta.

"In a way, it's fitting that my team was ousted by those guys during the tournament this year," said Quackenbush of the loss. "Pantera even pinned me with the same move that I used last year. They are great athletes and good sportsmen, and our match had a poetic ending."

Only minutes later, the team advanced to the semifinals after ousting The Colony.

Dorado took a beating from BLACKOUT early in the final round (above). Despite Blackout's constant attempt at winning through unfair tactics, the tecnicos took the big win when Dorado applied the CHIKARA special to Eddie Kingston, forcing Kingston to tap out (below).



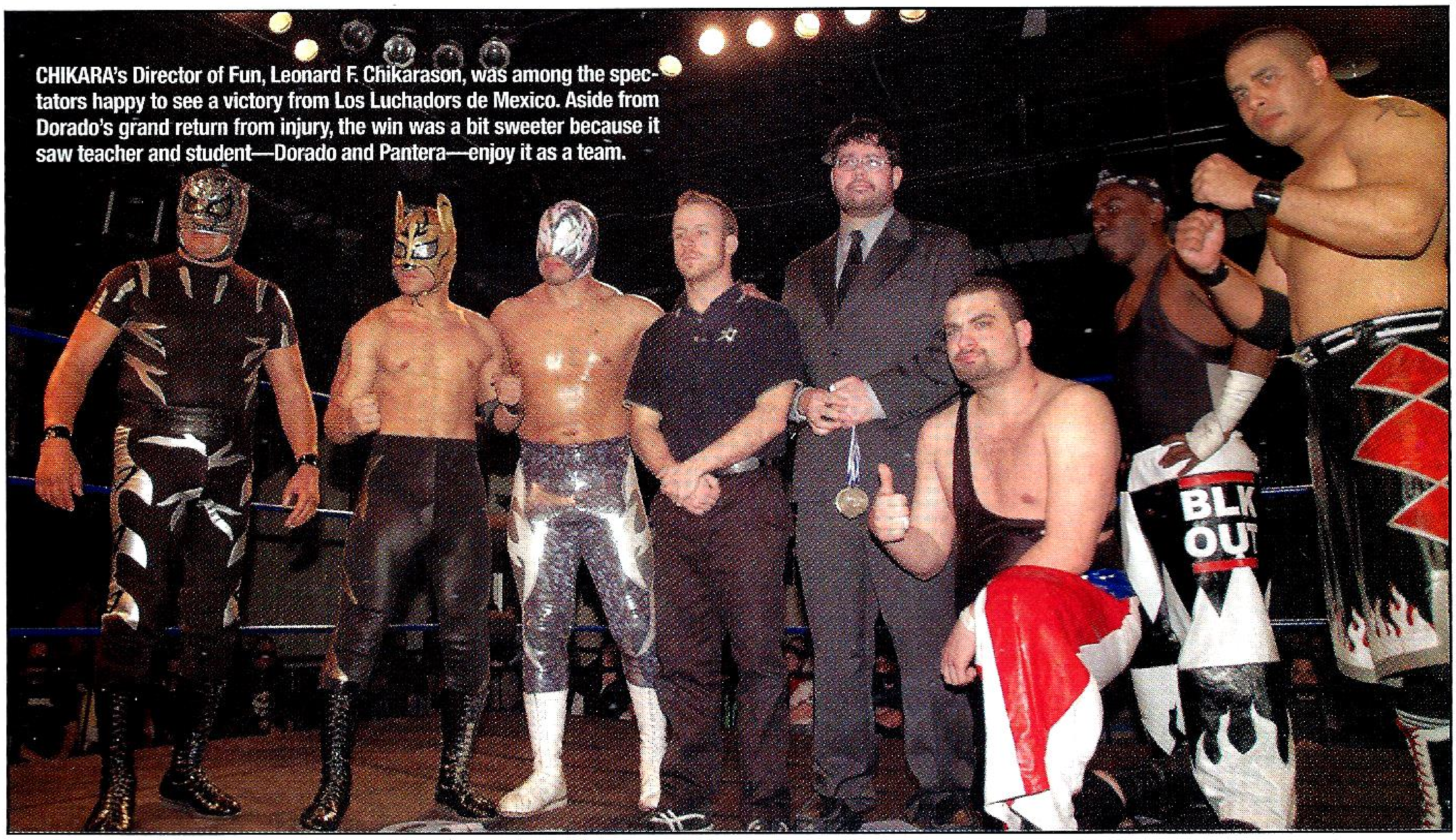
Lince Dorado's aerial assault nearly proved fatal to him several months ago. But Shane Storm's mat-based repertoire shows Dorado wasn't necessarily safe on his feet neither.

Despite the steady roll to the tournament final, the deciding match—against BLACKOUT—would prove to be the stiffest test for Dorado, who found himself in a déjà vu situation. Perched on the top rope, the ordeal, the consequences, and the long road back to competition crystallized in his mind. He hesitated an instant and then let his instincts take over. He snapped off a shooting star senton bomb just as he had against Mitch Ryder in November. This time, however, Dorado nailed the move with perfection. Then he locked on the CHIKARA special submission hold to earn victory for his team.

Suddenly, Dorado found himself experiencing yet another déjà vu moment—having his hand raised in victory to the fans' thunderous applause.

And as he soaked in adoration and applause from the crowd, Dorado reflected on both the night and the horrific incident he survived.

"I guess you could say me, Pantera, and Incognito were pretty heavy underdogs this weekend, especially in light of everything that's been going on with me. It's been a really tough road back. I loved coming back here for King of Trios. They say that if you can wrestle in Philadelphia you can wrestle anywhere. I'm just glad I got the chance once again." ☐



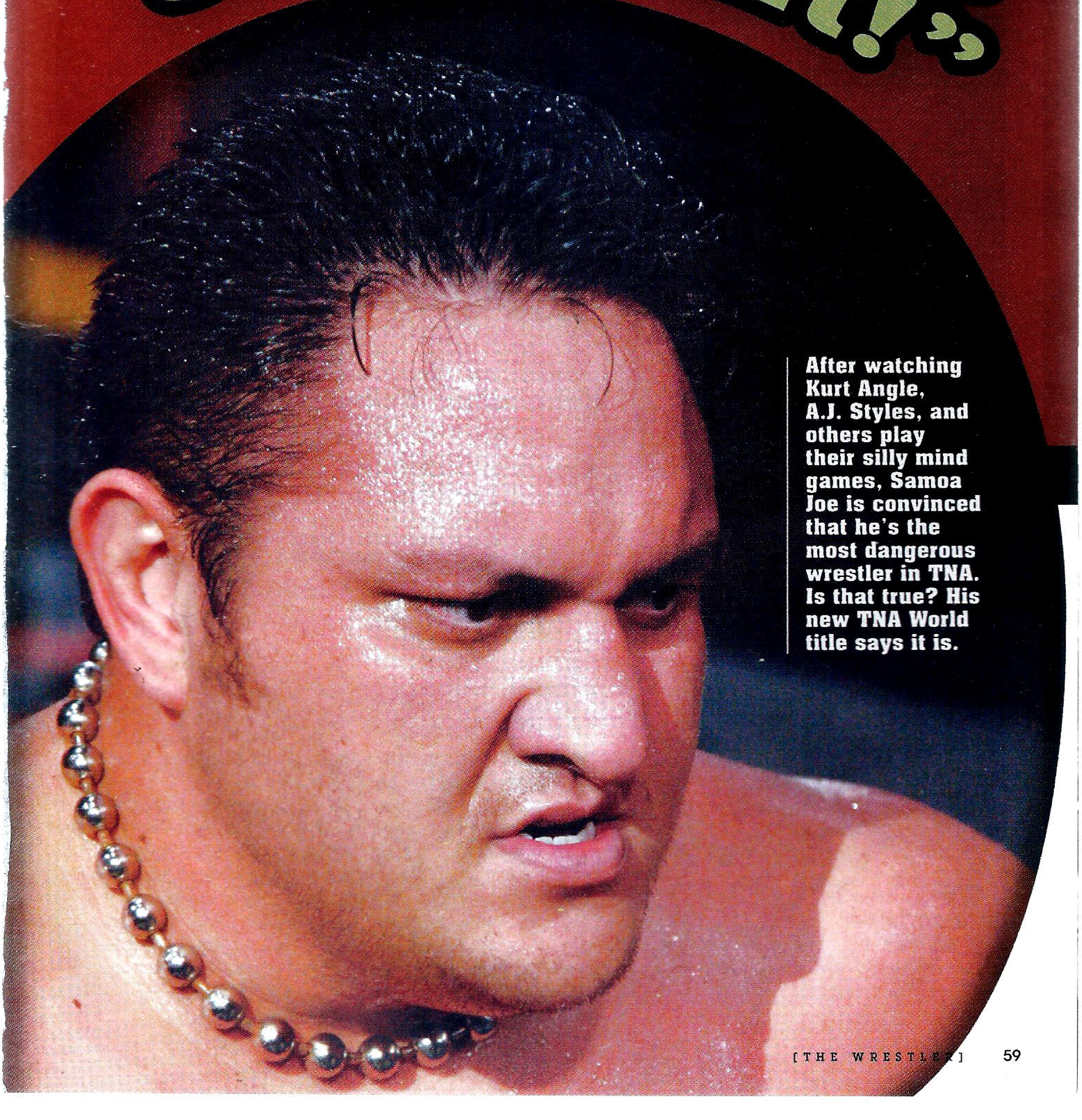
CHIKARA's Director of Fun, Leonard F. Chikarason, was among the spectators happy to see a victory from Los Luchadors de Mexico. Aside from Dorado's grand return from injury, the win was a bit sweeter because it saw teacher and student—Dorado and Pantera—enjoy it as a team.

Samoa Joe To TNA:

By Harry Burkett

"AHHHHHHH!" SAMOA JOE let out a noise that was something between a moan and a scream, but, in this case, it was more like a war cry, as he desperately tried to squirm his way out of Marcus Davis' anaconda chokehold. In a front facelock position, Davis had cinched his arm tight under Joe's armpit and chin. Joe's head was trapped between Davis' biceps and his own shoulder. Worse yet, Davis was slowly inching Joe into a gator

“Get Serious Or Get Hurt!”



After watching Kurt Angle, A.J. Styles, and others play their silly mind games, Samoa Joe is convinced that he's the most dangerous wrestler in TNA. Is that true? His new TNA World title says it is.

Samoa Joe trained with MMA experts to prepare for the worst against Kurt Angle at Lockdown. But Joe's primary defense is his ironclad offense. Joe's more of a striker, while Angle's more of a pure wrestler. That's why Angle vs. Joe is always such a fascinating matchup.

roll, so he could use Joe's 290-pound mass against him, using the weight on Joe's neck and shoulder to restrict more of his blood flow.

"Had enough, Joe?" asked Davis, his voice echoing throughout the gym.

"Yeah, that's it! I tap! I tap!" said Joe in a muffled voice. Davis unlocked the hold and helped his red-faced friend to his feet.

"You're just lucky Kurt Angle didn't hook you like that," said Davis.

"Ha, ha! That's the difference, Marc," said Joe, winking. "I'd never sit my ass on the mat and let Kurt put a hold like that on me. I'd give Kurt a big ol' palm between the eyes before that would happen."

Known as the "Irish Hand Grenade," Davis is 14-3 in mixed martial arts competition. He was also a contestant on *The Ultimate Fighter 2*. Joe knew he would be the perfect man to prepare him for what would be his successful challenge of TNA World champion Kurt Angle at Lockdown in April.

TNA executives liked the idea of a UFC fighter giving legitimacy to Samoa Joe and helping to create interest in Joe's match against Angle in the "Six Sides Of Steel." After all, TNA already had enough male-female drama, slapstick, and outright silliness.

Karen Angle's *Desperate Housewives* routine. The crown-wearing "Prince Of Phenomenal," A.J. Styles. Super Eric.

Need we say more?

Obviously, the Vince Russo faction of TNA Creative believes that sheer buffoonery is the best way to attract the attention of the casual channel-surfer. Sexy women and comedy may grab the attention of viewers, but that approach isn't enough to retain them as loyal fans. A small group of voices inside TNA insists there has to be some realistic ground-and-pound to offset the chicks and chuckles.

Samoa Joe is the loudest of those voices.

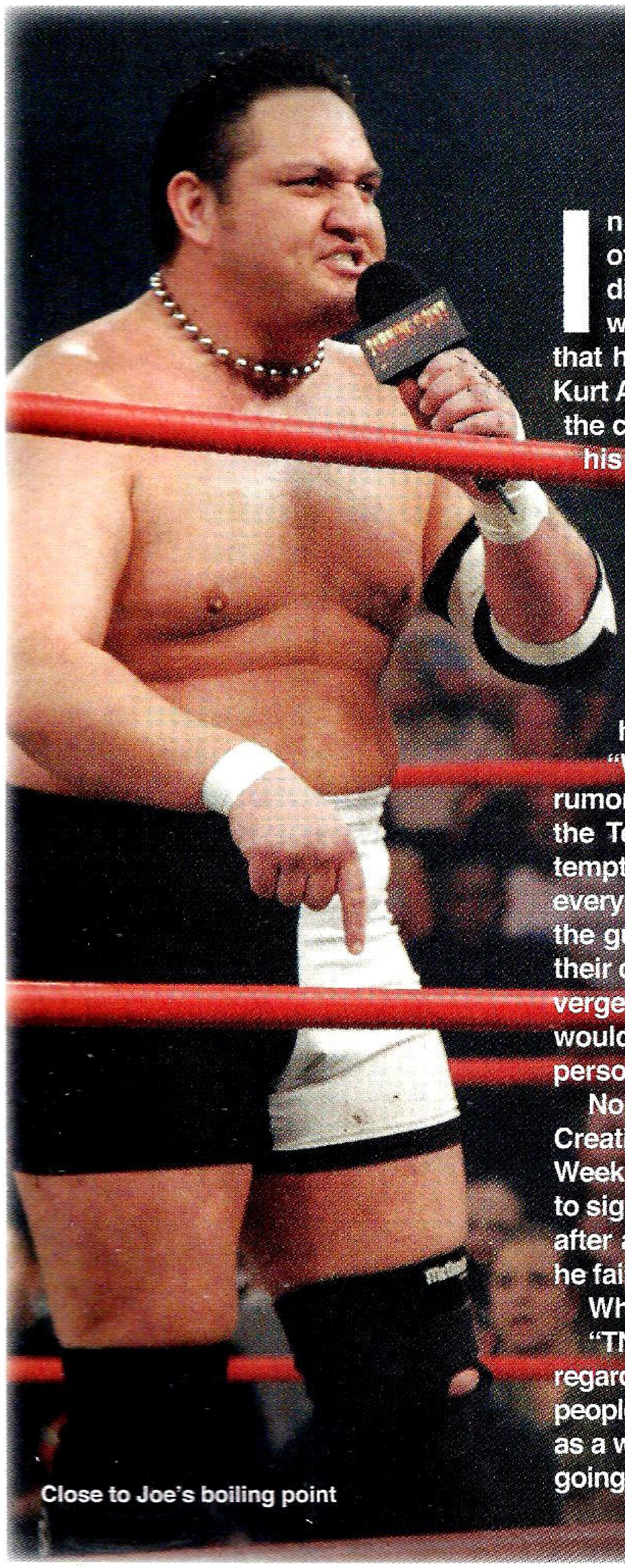
"Sometimes I feel sorry for these guys," said Joe. "You've got A.J. Styles, who was once called the greatest pound-for-pound wrestler on the planet, and he's flushed that reputation down the toilet by wearing that silly crown with that dimwitted doofus routine. I can't believe Tomko wastes his time with that guy. Tomko can kick anyone's ass—wrestling, shootfighting, whatever—and all he can do is roll his eyes at A.J."

Joe recalls one particular episode when he and Kevin Nash emerged from the backstage area and challenged Kurt Angle, who had just crowned Styles the "Prince Of Phenomenal" in a regal ceremony during *Impact's* final segment. "I saw that ridiculousness with Kurt, Karen, and A.J. on the monitor, and I asked myself, 'Do I want to be part of that?' Should Big Kev and I go ahead out there? At the time, I was glad to just go out there and stop the bull."

Does Joe think TNA is relying too much on comedy? Is there too much emphasis on storylines and not enough on actual matches?

"I'm not gonna criticize anybody for trying to put on an entertaining show,"

THE INTERNET BUZZ: Will Joe Go Or Stay?



Close to Joe's boiling point

In early-2008, Samoa Joe's possible defection to WWE was one of the hottest rumors on the Internet. Unhappy with his career direction, Joe was thinking about not renewing his TNA contract, which was due to expire in June. Joe was frustrated by the fact that he had come out on the definitive losing end of his feud with Kurt Angle, he thought his tough-guy image was being tarnished by the comedic soap-opera environment of TNA, and he believed that his career had come to a dead end.

All of this came to a head at Turning Point. When Scott Hall no-showed the December pay-per-view, Joe was asked to address Hall's absence to the PPV audience. Instead, he went on a tirade, accusing TNA of coddling worn-out veterans at the expense of up-and-comers who were busting their butts in the ring. When TNA President Dixie Carter walked toward the ring and signaled for Joe to wrap up his diatribe, he dared her to fire him.

"With all those elements, it's no wonder why there were so many rumors that Joe was leaving TNA," said Donald Wayne, who covers the Tennessee-based company for THE WRESTLER. "Sure, Joe was tempted by the prospect of more money and wider exposure. But everyone close to Joe tells me the same thing: He's bonded with the guys in TNA, he respects most people in management despite their creative differences, and he really thinks the company is on the verge of something big. On the other hand, he had no idea how WWE would handle his character, or whether they would force-feed a new persona entirely."

Nonetheless, the Internet rumors were so rampant that TNA Creative chose to exploit the situation by turning it into a storyline. Week after week, Managing Director Jim Cornette begged Samoa Joe to sign a new contract, only to be interrupted by one unrelated crisis after another. Finally, Joe vowed that he would quit the company if he failed to beat Angle for the World title at Lockdown.

What does this mean? Will Joe be headed for WWE or not?

"TNA management must have given Joe some significant assurances regarding the direction of his career," Wayne added. "I think most people agree that a contract renewal is good for Joe and the company as a whole. And since Joe's title win at Lockdown, I can't imagine he's going anywhere now."

—Harry Burkett

> **“Sexy women and comedy may grab the attention of viewers, but that approach isn’t enough to retain them as loyal fans. A small group of voices inside TNA insists there has to be some realistic ground-and-pound to offset the chicks and chuckles.”**

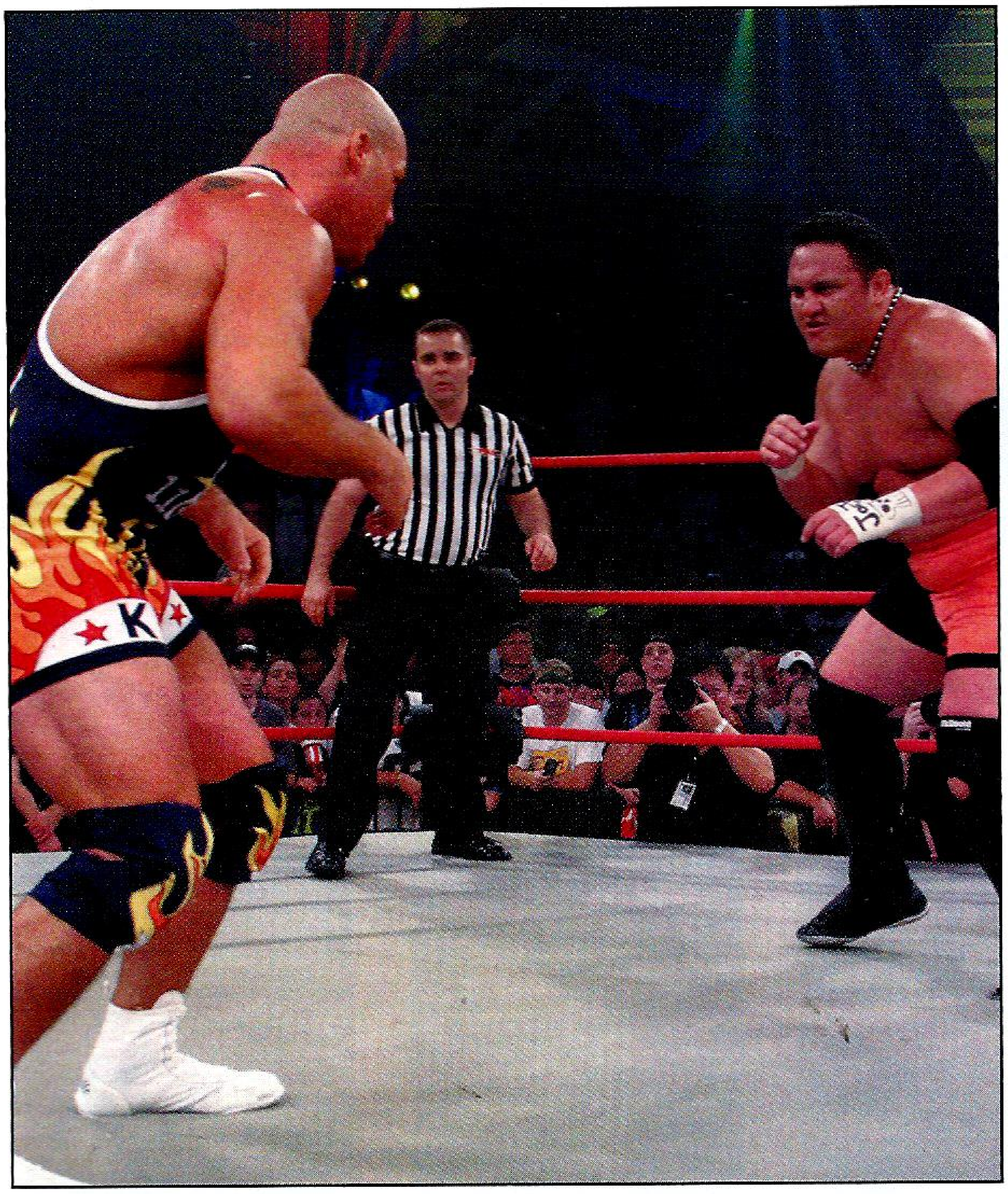
Joe thinks the TNA product is suffering from too many comical angles involving true talents like A.J. Styles. The “Prince Of Phenomenal” is donning regal crowns and pining after Mrs. Angle, instead of focusing on being the serious athlete he once was for TNA.

he responded. “The more eyes that puts on TNA, the better. Hey, I danced with my family’s Polynesian dance troupe before I became a wrestler. I dig entertainment. If TNA wants me to put on a grass skirt and do a Samoan tribal dance, I’d be happy to do that. But there’s a time for fun and there’s a time to get serious. And some of these guys ... geez, especially Angle! I’ve got one message: Get serious or get hurt!”

Joe had vowed that if he failed to win the World title at Lockdown, he would leave TNA. Why did he make such a vow? It is because Angle declared that it would be Joe’s final title shot, and Joe knew that if he could no longer wrestle an athlete the caliber of Angle—or at least gain a position of influence as World champion—that he could very well end up wearing a hula skirt, a crown, or a Superman cape as a full-time gimmick on *Impact*.

“I think Joe may be overreacting a bit,” stated TNA play-by-play man Mike Tenay. “I agree that TNA’s wrestlers have some colorful personas, but I would argue that each one of those guys knows how to turn it on when the bell rings. Sure, A.J. Styles may be acting, let’s say, eccentric these days, yet that doesn’t make his 450 splash, his suicide plancha, or his

Joe is no killjoy; he knows how to have fun. He has even showcased his dancing skills to the TNA audience. But once Joe makes his way to the ring, the “Samoan Submission Machine” is all business.



Angle is glad to have Joe as an opponent and appreciates his strict focus on wrestling. But Angle also thinks Joe may be underestimating his seriousness, which plays directly into Angle's hands.

Styles clash any less effective. The same goes for 'Black Machismo' Jay Lethal. He's added some of Randy Savage's smashmouth, high-impact offense, and that has improved his game overall.

"Look, the competition in TNA takes place inside and outside the ring. Some of these guys will do anything to get noticed, and that makes TNA all the more entertaining."

Ironically, no one has balanced athleticism and showmanship more adeptly than Joe's arch-nemesis, Angle. Like Styles, he was accused of being dimwitted numerous times during his WWE career, most notably when he was aligned with Steve Austin and Vince McMahon during the summer of 2001. By that fall, though, he was celebrating a WWF World title victory in his hometown of Pittsburgh immediately following 9/11.

Nobody called Angle a fool at that time. He was hailed as a national hero.

"This may sound crazy for me to say, but I appreciate Samoa Joe," said Angle, only a few days before their ill-fated Lockdown clash. "He's ready when that bell rings. But my philosophy is that anything is fair game before a match. Do your best to psych out your opponent. I suppose that's why Joe doesn't think I'm serious enough. Well, Joe's got a short memory. He's going to find out how serious I can be ... when he's the one hurt."

Marcus Davis knew Joe wasn't taking Angle lightly. Every time Joe looked into Davis' eyes and saw Angle, the savvy UFC competitor knew it was time for a break. He knew there is a difference between sparring to get ready for a match ... and taking it so seriously that someone gets hurt.

And he knew Joe was deadly serious. ☐

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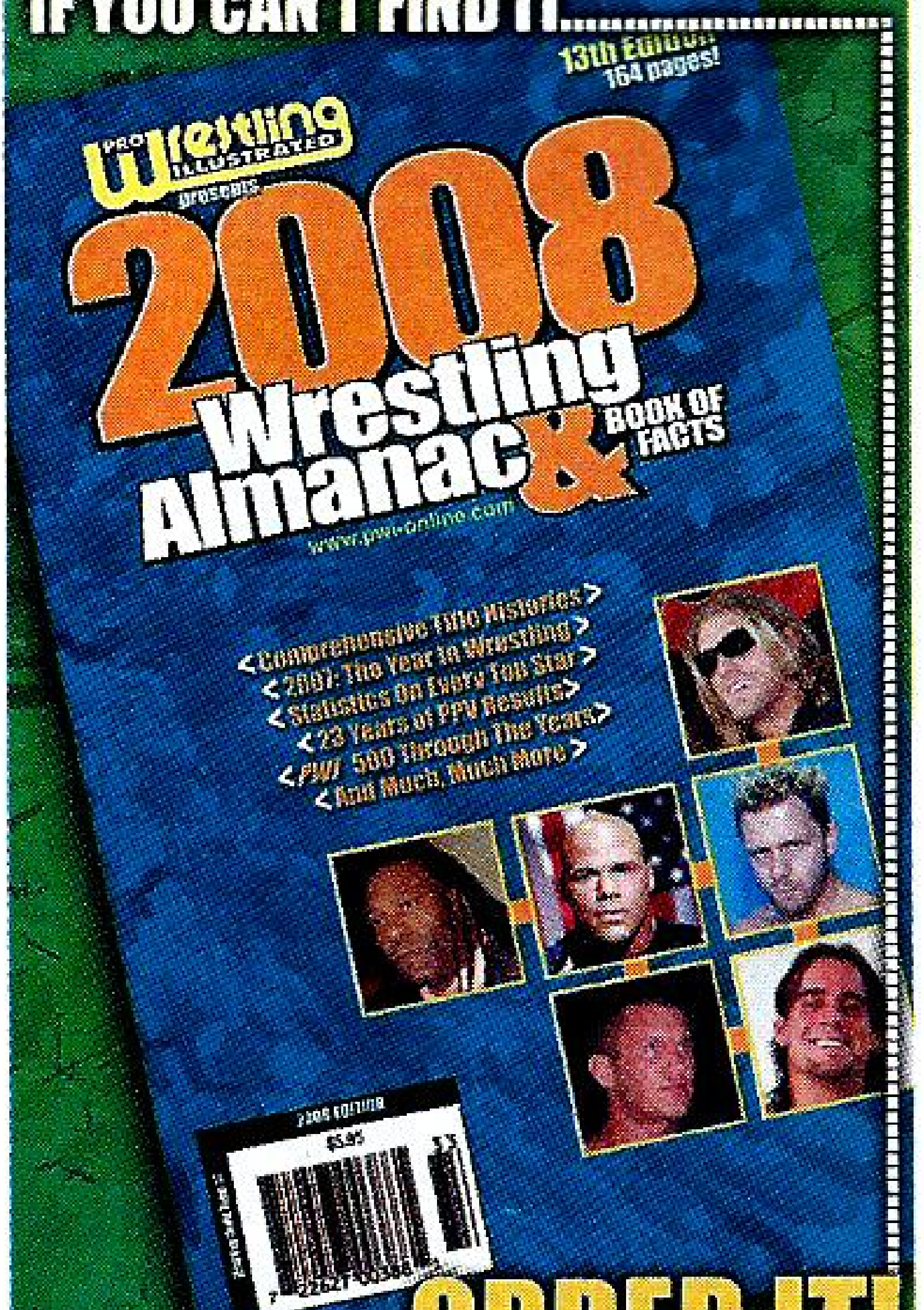

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THE WRESTLING ANALYST

KEN KENNEDY

Years Pro:	9
Size:	6'2", 247 lbs.
"*PWI 500*" Listings:	2007—21
	2006—204
	2005—279
Titles:	ACW heavyweight championship
	ACW tag team championship
	ACW TV championship
	MAW heavyweight championship
	NWA Midwest heavyweight championship
	WWE U.S. championship
	XICW tag team championship
	UPCW tag team championship
***PWI* Awards:**	None

[THE NUMBERS]

Offense (8.0): For a big man, Kennedy is surprisingly quick and maintains a solid ability to utilize high-flying aerial tactics when needed. His ground game currently leaves much to be desired, but it doesn't appear as if he's intent on changing.

Defense (9.0): Kennedy is one of the true talented blockers in all of professional wrestling. He very obviously does not like taking punishment, so he works harder than most on his defense. The result is very impressive.

Experience (8.0): Being a part of the Smackdown brand during its rise to respectability helped foster Kennedy's growth in the ring, and a move to the Raw brand only accentuated that advancement. His rating would be higher here if he had taken the step so many figured he would by this point by becoming a legitimate Raw World title contender. He's playing it safe when he needs to be taking chances.

Conditioning (9.0): He's not the most physically intimidating man in WWE, but he's certainly not just another oversized cruiserweight. Kennedy is a natural athlete who stays in excellent condition. While his experience and sometimes-flawed offensive game may hinder his chances of coming out on top, he'll never be out-hustled by an opponent.

Science (9.0): At times, it feels as if there is so much more to Kennedy's repertoire that he is holding back. The man knows the sport and is constantly working to improve his game, but it hasn't exactly translated to many significant victories just yet. His approach to a match seems fueled far too often by the intensity of his personality and desire to punish opponents.

Stamina (9.0): Kennedy can motor on throughout a match without any issues, and that's going to serve him well when he's wrestling main events at pay-per-views in the future. All of the greats have been able to blend stamina with a sound scientific game to ascend to top-tier status, and Kennedy has half of that equation figured out already

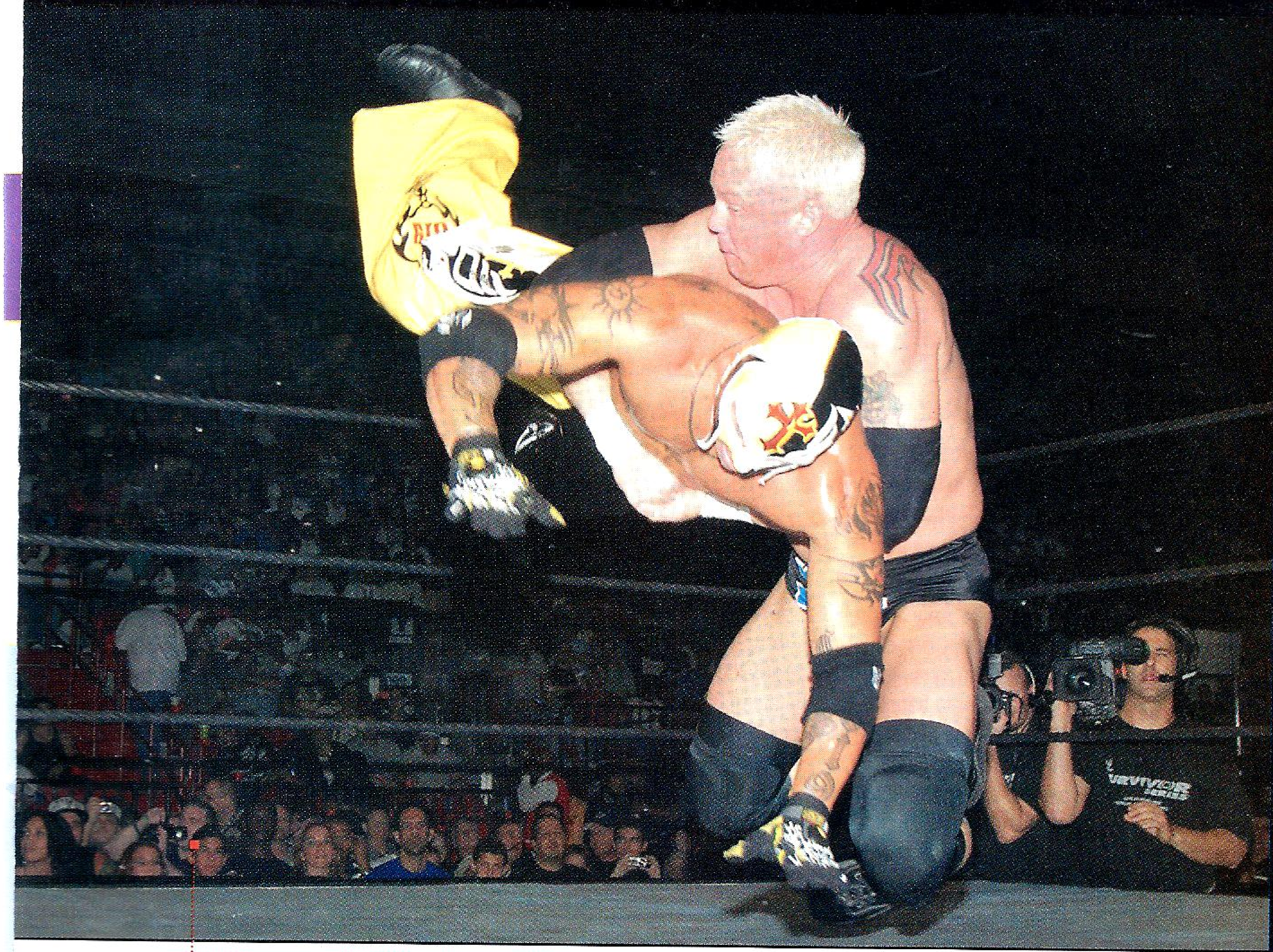
Power (9.0): With an excellent blend of length and strength, Kennedy, while not overly muscular, can manipulate men considerably larger. His Green Bay plunge finishing maneuver consistently amazes fans and obliterates opponents.

Speed (8.5): The next time Kennedy wrestles a televised match, one look at his gait should indicate where speed falls into his game. A lumbering fellow who makes his body larger and wider than it is, Kennedy shows bursts of speed throughout his matches, but doesn't rely on it for any extended periods of time. Kennedy is quick, but not speedy.

Ability To Absorb Punishment (7.5): The ability to take a beating and deliver it back tenfold is the hallmark of a great wrestler. In Kennedy's case, he's completely capable of delivering a beating; however, his ability to recover after being on the receiving end of an attack is not his greatest asset.

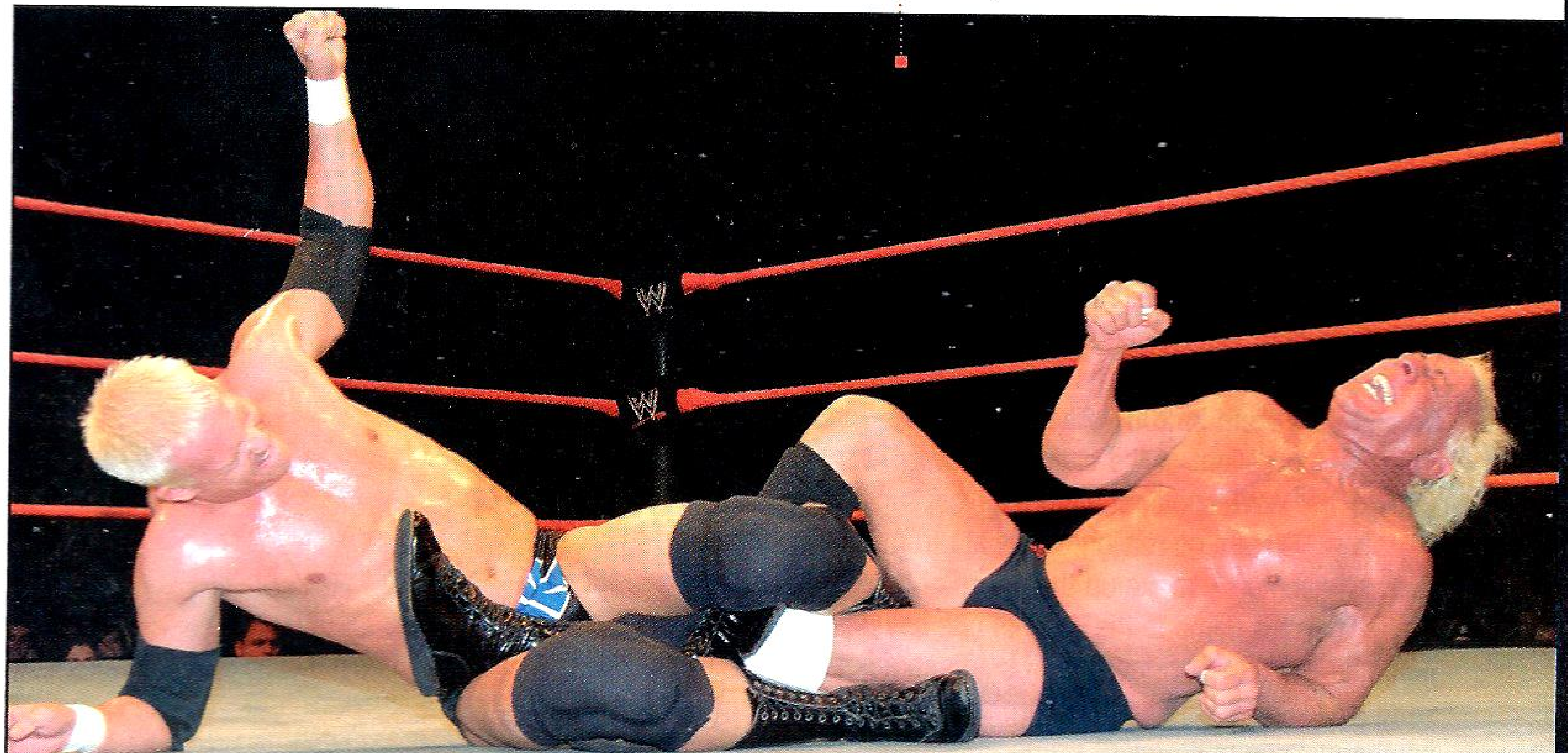
Quality Of Opposition (9.0): Kennedy has squared off against nearly every top talent WWE has to offer and, by and large, he's acquitted himself quite well. The only issue here is that he had yet to have a meaningful one-on-one contest with a top contender when championship gold is on the line. The entire landscape of a match changes when gold is involved, and Kennedy has yet to meet that test.

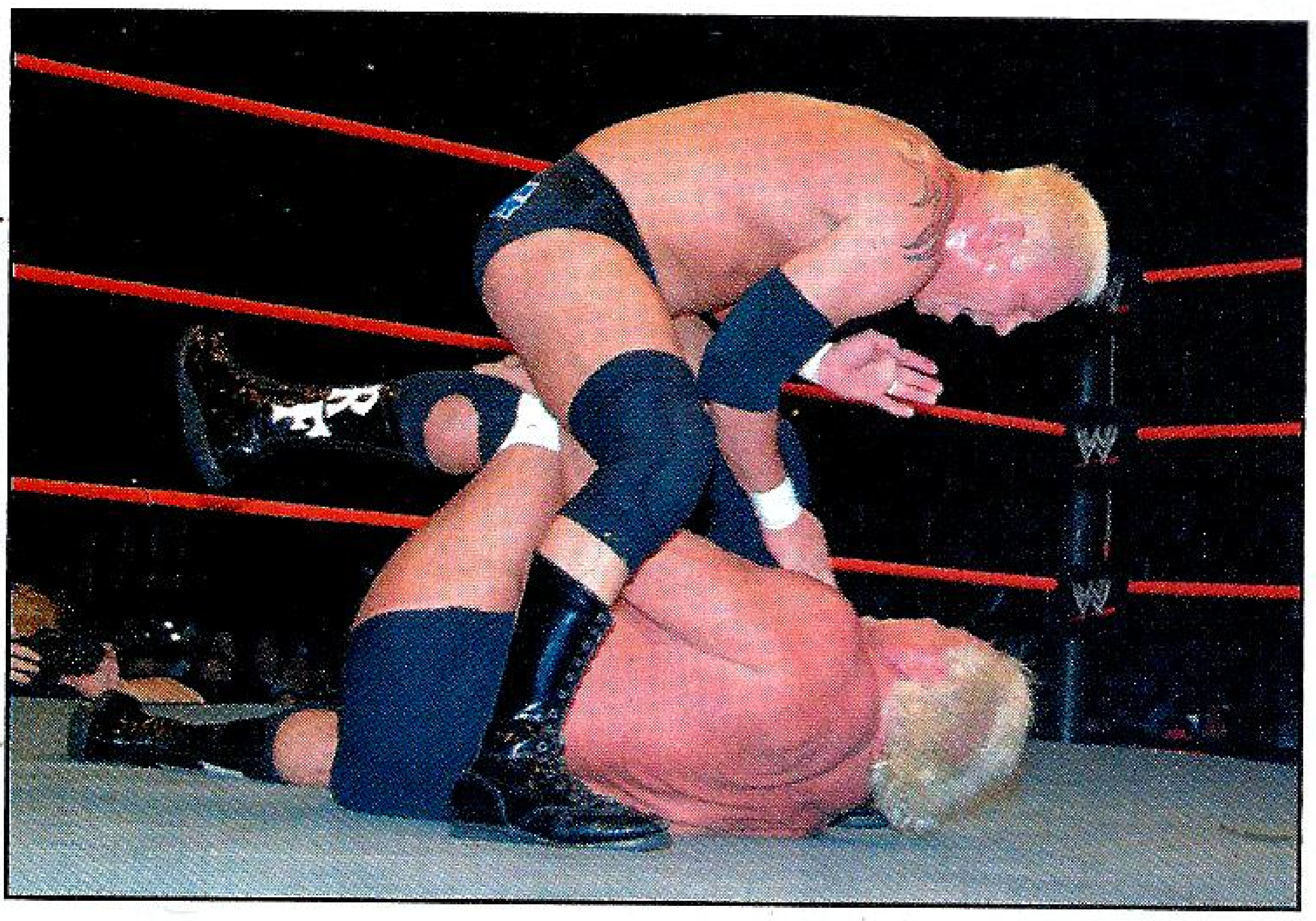
① Cody Rhodes didn't see Kennedy coming at the Royal Rumble, when Kennedy planted this boot on the young man's face. Kennedy's critics are waiting to see him do this on a consistent basis against a higher caliber of opponent.



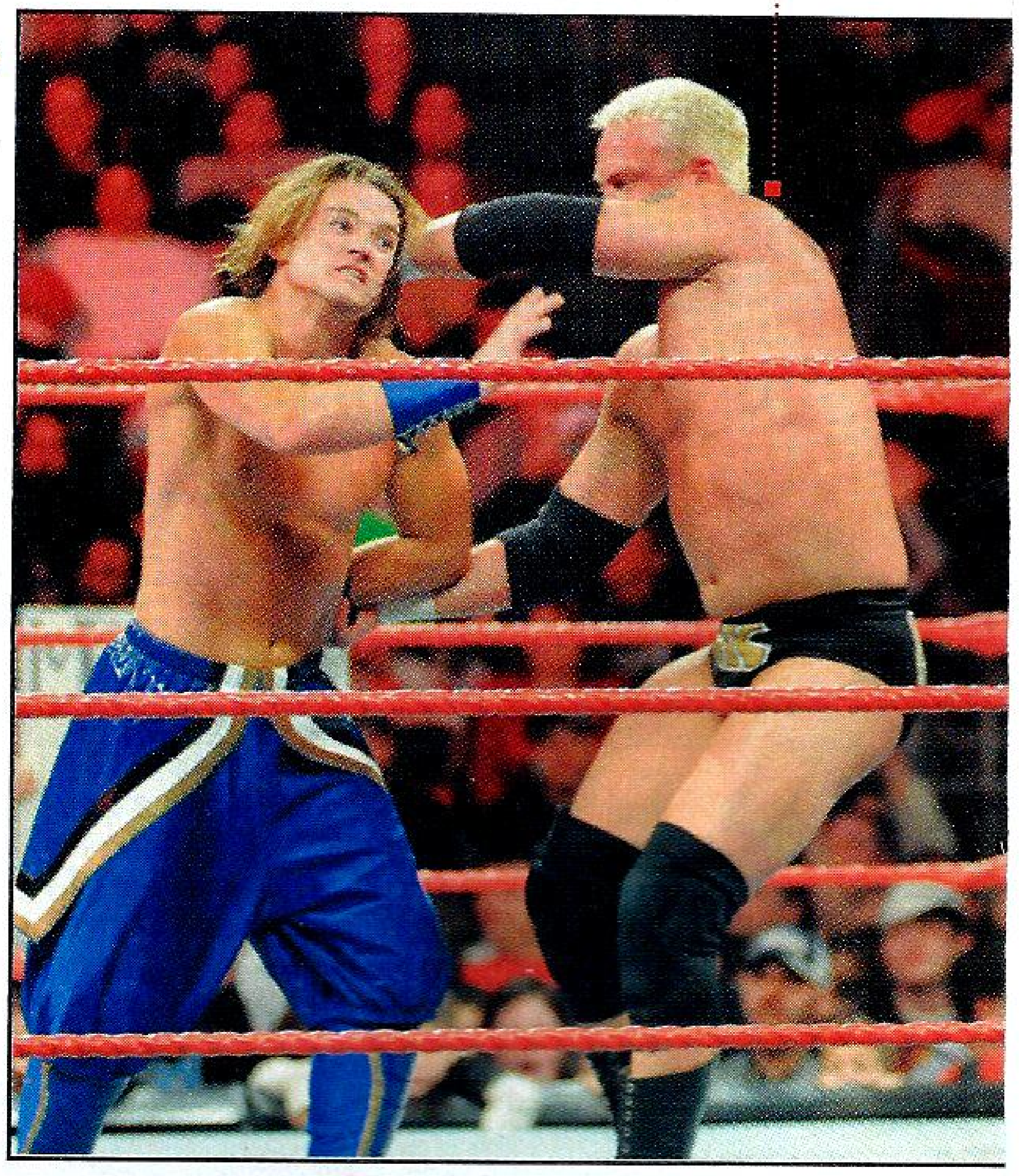
② Kennedy can keep up with the most energetic WWE superstars, including Rey Mysterio. He is also physical enough to hold his own against the company's largest stars.

③ Although he has succeeded in matches against top WWE stars, Kennedy has yet to hold big-time gold. He just can't seem to get into position to challenge WWE titleholders for a belt. Winning is better than losing, but a title win is the most important kind of victory.





④ Kennedy's biggest strength is his big mouth, but until he can back up the self-promotions with a world title belt, the words mean nothing. Still, Kennedy has the fans eating up the hype he's feeding them, making him a valuable WWE commodity.



⑤ There's no telling if Brian Kendrick will still be around 10 years from now, but it would be shocking if Kennedy isn't a top star by then. He is teeming with potential; he just needs to realize it.

[THE ANALYSIS]

Repertoire: At times, Kennedy relies too much on the high-impact/high-risk move that can either set him up for an immediate victory or leave him completely vulnerable for a loss. His Kenton bomb is a wonder to behold, as is the awe-inspiring Green Bay plunge. However, his most impressive core move may be his mike check leghook reverse STO. A simple move, in essence, the mike check can be employed seemingly out of nowhere, unlike his other pet finishers, which require a fair amount of setup. Throughout a match, Kennedy employs a series of strikes and old-school wear-down holds to weaken his opponents. His repertoire is solid, but there's definitely room to improve.

Strengths: The Rock made a very, very good living off of speaking his mind, insulting his opponents, and trademarking some of the most repeated catchphrases in history. "The Great One" backed up his talking with an impressive, albeit limited, move set that drove the fans into a frenzy. Kennedy—while some may consider it heresy to say so—is on a path very similar to The Rock's. His greatest asset at this point in his career is the ability to derive emotion from the fans and feed off of that excitement in his matches. His move set will come along with time, but his ability to engage the fans and make them simultaneously love and hate him is his greatest strength.

Weaknesses: The man loves himself and is far better at telling the world what he should get rather than going out and taking it. In the ring, Kennedy's ability to string together a series of moves is good, but not great. On top of that, he tends to sit back too much at times when his plan of attack is spoiled. If he's thrown off his game, Kennedy tends to resort to shortcuts that will not pay off when he enters a world title chase in earnest. His drive is evident, but he needs to get to a place where it is matched by his ability.

Defining Career Moment: Kennedy's defining moment came at WrestleMania 23 in front of 80,000-plus fans at Ford Field in 2007. The prohibitive favorite came out on top in the "Money In The Bank" ladder match, much to the delight of the capacity crowd. At that point, it appeared that Kennedy was headed for a very busy 2007 in the WWE spotlight, before a biceps injury cost him his guaranteed contract.

Future: There's no reason to deviate from the popular belief that Kennedy is part of a core group of wrestlers that will eventually make up the future of WWE. With an aging group of legends in his path, Kennedy could very easily hone his game to the point of one day being a bona fide Hall of Fame candidate. There's just so much raw potential in him right now that it's sometimes hard to see past his present inconsistency to maintain focus on what should be a very bright future. Still, it's hard to imagine a scenario that doesn't involve Kennedy finally making the move to main-event status.

OFFICIAL RATINGS

TOP 10

1 **THE UNDERTAKER**
304, Dallas, TX
(10) Smackdown World champion

2 **SAMOA JOE**
290, Samoa
(–) TNA World champion

3 **RANDY ORTON**
245, St. Louis, MO
(3) Raw World champion

4 **KURT ANGLE**
233, Pittsburgh, PA
(2) No. 1 contender: TNA World title

5 **NIGEL McGUINNESS**
220, London, England
(4) Ring of Honor champion

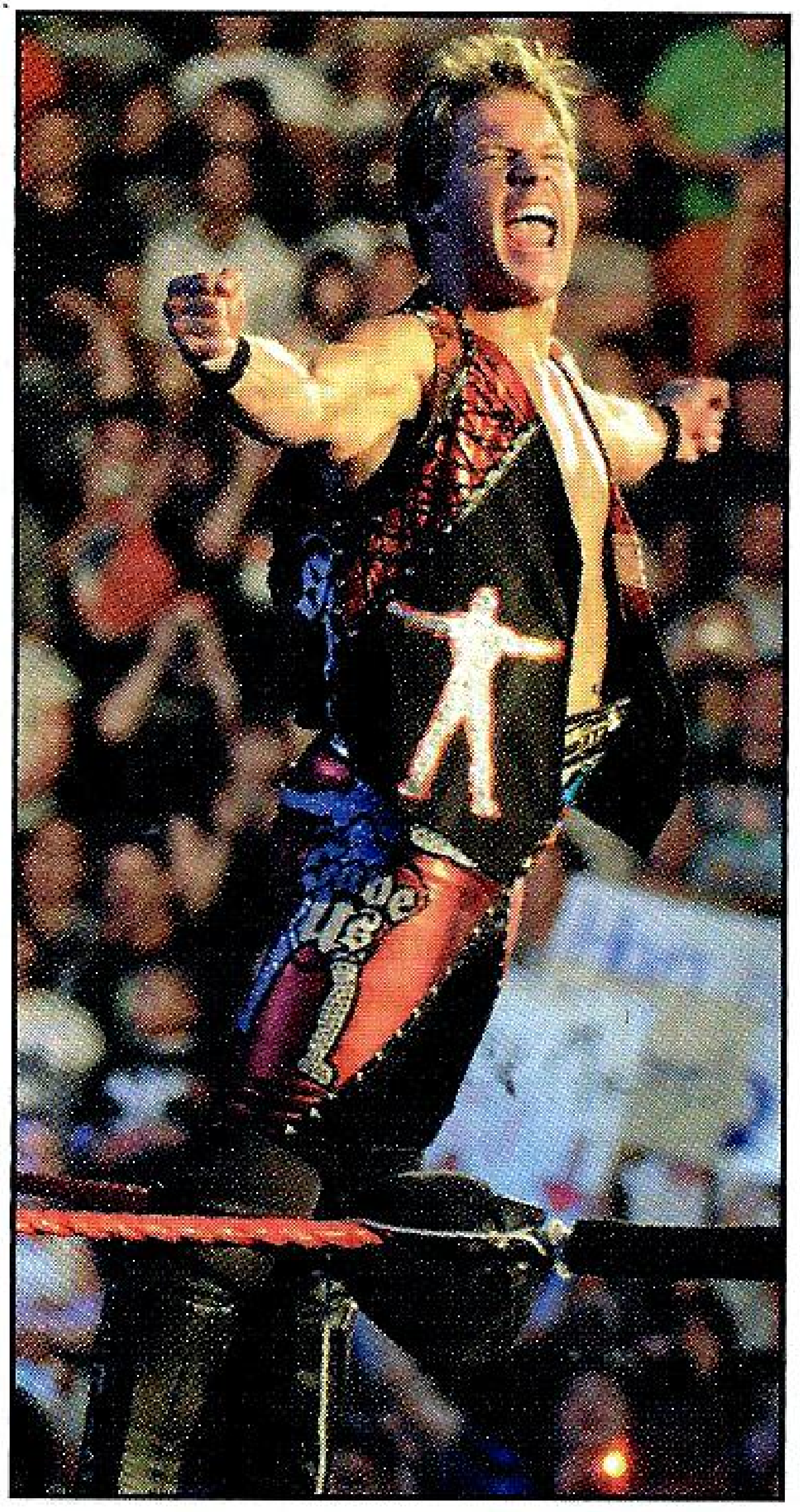
6 **SHINSUKE NAKAMURA**
229, Mineyama, Japan
(5) IWGP champion

7 **KANE**
326, St. Louis, MO
(–) ECW champion

8 **TRIPLE-H**
269, Greenwich, CT
(7) No. 1 contender: Raw World title

9 **JOHN BRADSHAW LAYFIELD**
309, Roscoe, TX
(–) No. 2 contender: Raw World title

10 **JAKE HAGER**
285, Perry, OK
(–) FCW heavyweight champion


Chris Jericho

TAG TEAMS

1 **HARDCORE HOLLY & CODY RHODES**
Combined weight: 467 pounds
(1) Raw World tag team champions

2 **JOHN MORRISON & THE MIZ**
Combined weight: 414 pounds
(3) Smackdown World tag team champions

3 **KAZ & ERIC YOUNG**
Combined weight: 445 pounds
(–) No. 1 contenders: TNA World tag team title

4 **TOGI MAKABE & TORU YANO**
Combined weight: 488 pounds
(8) IWGP tag team champions

5 **SANTINO MARELLA & CARLITO**
Combined weight: 447 pounds
(–) No. 1 contenders: Raw World tag team title

6 **THE UNDERTAKER & KANE**
Combined weight: 630 pounds
(–) No. 1 contenders: Smackdown World tag team title

7 **A.J. STYLES & TRAVIS TOMKO**
Combined weight: 494 pounds
(2) No. 2 contenders: TNA World tag team title

8 **JAY & MARK BRISCOE**
Combined weight: 385 pounds
(7) ROH tag team champions

9 **CHRIS SABIN & ALEX SHELLEY**
Combined weight: 406 pounds
(4) No. 3 contenders: TNA World tag team title

10 **ERIC PEREZ & EDDIE COLON**
Combined weight: 456 pounds
(9) FCW tag team champions

WWE RAW

World Champion:
RANDY ORTON
(C) 245, St. Louis, MO

1—**TRIPLE-H**
(2) 269, Greenwich, CT
2—**JOHN B. LAYFIELD**
(7) 309, Roscoe, TX
3—**JOHN CENA**
(1) 260, West Newbury, MA
4—**CHRIS JERICHO**
(3) 220, Winnipeg, Manitoba
5—**SHAWN MICHAELS**
(6) 217, San Antonio, TX
6—**KEN KENNEDY**
(5) 246, Green Bay, WI
7—**UMAGA**
(–) 348, Samoa
8—**CARLITO**
(10) 220, San Juan, Puerto Rico
9—**C.M. PUNK**
(–) 210, Chicago, IL
10—**MATT HARDY**
(–) 213, Cameron, NC

WWE SMACKDOWN

World Champion:
THE UNDERTAKER
(1) 304, Dallas, TX

1—**BATISTA**
(2) 318, Washington, DC
2—**EDGE**
(C) 240, Toronto, Ontario
3—**MVP**
(8) 252, Miami, FL
4—**KANE**
(5) 326, St. Louis, MO
5—**MARK HENRY**
(–) 380, Silsbee, TX
6—**THE GREAT KHALI**
(6) 408, Bombay, India
7—**C.M. PUNK**
(–) 210, Chicago, IL
8—**FESTUS**
(–) 330, Cumberland, MD
9—**KOFI KINGSTON**
(–) 225, Jamaica
10—**FINLAY**
(4) 230, Belfast, Ireland

ECW

Champion:
KANE
(–) 326, St. Louis, MO

1—**C.M. PUNK**
(1) 210, Chicago, IL
2—**CHAVO GUERRERO JR.**
(C) 210, El Paso, TX
3—**THE MIZ**
(8) 210, Parma, OH
4—**KOFI KINGSTON**
(9) 225, Jamaica
5—**THE BIG SHOW**
(–) 485, Aiken, SC
6—**SHELTON BENJAMIN**
(7) 245, Minneapolis, MN
7—**MIKE KNOX**
(–) 260, Amarillo, TX
8—**JOHN MORRISON**
(5) 204, Hanover, WV
9—**TOMMY DREAMER**
(4) 260, Yonkers, NY
10—**STEVIE RICHARDS**
(6) 225, Philadelphia, PA

TNA

World Champion:
SAMOA JOE
(1) 290, Samoa

1—**KURT ANGLE**
(C) 233, Pittsburgh, PA
2—**PETEY WILLIAMS**
(–) 179, Windsor, Ontario
3—**CHRISTIAN CAGE**
(2) 225, Toronto, Ontario
4—**ERIC YOUNG**
(–) 225, Vancouver, B.C.
5—**TRAVIS TOMKO**
(6) 292, Tombstone, AZ
6—**JAY LETHAL**
(3) 192, Elizabeth, NJ
7—**JOHNNY DEVINE**
(4) 222, Las Vegas, NV
8—**KAZ**
(5) 215, Yucca Valley, CA
9—**A.J. STYLES**
(7) 202, Gainesville, GA
10—**BOOKER T**
(9) 250, Houston, TX

Top 10 and tag team ratings are based on won-lost records for the past month, quality of opposition, and inherent skill of each wrestler or team. These ratings are compiled by the magazine's editorial board. All other ratings are based on the official current positions of challengers to the top title in each category; certain title-holders receive an automatic spot in the ratings. The number in parentheses indicates a wrestler's position in that category last issue; (–) indicates that the wrestler was not rated in that category last issue while (C) indicates the wrestler was champion in that category last issue. Note: In an effort to keep the ratings as up-to-date as possible, these pages are often the last to be sent to the printer. Thus, the ratings may reflect changes not reflected in the remainder of the issue.

[FOR PERIOD ENDED APRIL 21, 2008]

AMERICAN WRESTLING ASSOCIATION: Champion—Brian Logan; **1**—Larry Zbyszko; **2**—Ricky Landell; **3**—Chasyn Rance; **4**—Mister Saint Laurent; **5**—Kirby Mack; **6**—T.J. Mack; **7**—Honky Tonk Man; **8**—The Patriot; **9**—Shawn Daivari; **10**—Jake Milliman

BLOOD SWEAT, AND EARS: Champion—Frankie the Mobster; **1**—Xtremo; **2**—Ash; **3**—James Champagne; **4**—Tyson Dux; **5**—Kris Chambers; **6**—Big Brian Youngblood; **7**—Kelly Couture; **8**—Tiger Star; **9**—Anton Arakis; **10**—El Tornado.

CHIKARA: Champion—Helios; **1**—Hallowicked; **2**—Delirious; **3**—Lince Dorado; **4**—El Pantera; **5**—Incognito; **6**—Claudio Castagnoli; **7**—Mike Quackenbush; **8**—Mitch Ryder; **9**—Eddie Kingston; **10**—Shayne Hawke.

FORCE ONE PRO WRESTLING: Champion—Danny Doring; **1**—Judas Young; **2**—Breaker Morant; **3**—Tommy Force; **4**—White Lotus; **5**—Patch; **6**—Diego DeMarco; **7**—Mike Reed; **8**—Ryu Lee; **9**—Rockin Rebel; **10**—Nicky Benz.

FULL IMPACT PRO: Champion—Roderick Strong; **1**—Nigel McGuinness; **2**—Erick Stevens; **3**—Delirious; **4**—Sal Rinauro; **5**—Tyler Black; **6**—Chasyn Rance; **7**—Austin Aries; **8**—Davey Richards; **9**—Kenny King; **10**—Jason Blade

GREAT PLAINS CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING: Champion—Carnage; **1**—Slash; **2**—Xavior; **3**—Kevin Morgan; **4**—Max McGuirk; **5**—Al Farat; **6**—Joe Herell; **7**—Martin Justice; **8**—Rick Payne; **9**—Eric Rose; **10**—Thomas Trump.

IMPACT ZONE WRESTLING: Champion—Angel Williams; **1**—John O'Malley; **2**—Nathan Sensation; **3**—John Zorthos; **4**—Kenny Campbell; **5**—Striker; **6**—Jermaine Johnson; **7**—Michael Barry; **8**—Tommy Revell; **9**—Shawn Sanders; **10**—Se7en.

NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING: Champion—The New York Gangster; **1**—Chris Norte; **2**—L.T. Falk; **3**—Jason James; **4**—The Boss; **5**—Bizarro; **6**—Damien Payne; **7**—Buff Bagwell; **8**—Steve O; **9**—The Black Ninja; **10**—D'Angelo.

OLD SCHOOL WRESTLING ALLIANCE: Champion—Brandon Keith; **1**—Bob Orton Jr.; **2**—Adam Evans; **3**—Greg Valentine; **4**—Joey Grunge; **5**—Kamala; **6**—Jamie Dundee; **7**—Steve Williams; **8**—Steve Boz; **9**—Koko B. Ware; **10**—Big Daddy Destruction.

OLD TIME WRESTLING: Champion—Dan De Man Jones; **1**—Sir Gaylord Fauntleroy; **2**—Fuji Tanaka; **3**—Bazooka Joe; **4**—EsteBan; **5**—I.M. Smarter; **6**—Greg Hoyga; **7**—Rhett Titus; **8**—Brian Johnson; **9**—C.K. Cross; **10**—Matt Miles.

STORMFORCE WRESTLING: Champion—K.C. McKnight; **1**—Justin Flash; **2**—Joey Silvia; **3**—Mike Booth; **4**—Damien Wayne; **5**—Corey Edsel; **6**—Charlie Dreamer; **7**—Louis Moore; **8**—Kamikaze Kid; **9**—Kirby Mack; **10**—Jake Manning.

WORLD CLASS EXTREME WRESTLING: Champion—Corey Edsel; **1**—Hangtime; **2**—Cletus Bass; **3**—K.C. McKnight; **4**—Tracy Gilbert; **5**—Bobby Wohlfert; **6**—Dillinger; **7**—Aaron Devil; **8**—Kid Evil; **9**—Shaq Knox; **10**—D.Z. Hyde.

RING OF HONOR

Champion:

NIGEL McGUINNESS
(C) 220, London, England

1—KEVIN STEEN
(6) 225, Marieville, Quebec

2—AUSTIN ARIES
(3) 202, Milwaukee, WI

3—BRYAN DANIELSON
(2) 185, Aberdeen, WA

4—ERICK STEVENS
(1) 231, Sarasota, FL

5—TAKESHI MORISHIMA
(4) 297, Tokyo, Japan

6—RODERICK STRONG
(5) 205, Tampa, FL

7—GO SHIOZAKI
(7) 220, Tokyo, Japan

8—DAVEY RICHRDS
(–) 202, Othello, WA

9—CLAUDIO CASTAGNOLI
(–) 232, Schaffhausen, Switzerland

10—EL GENERICO
(8) 180, Montreal, Canada

OVW

Champion:

JAKE HAGER
(1) 285, Perry, OK

1—HEATH MILLER
(C) 235, Pineville, WV

2—TITAN
(–) 330, Tampa, FL

3—T.J. WILSON
(2) 195, Calgary, Alberta

4—TED DiBIASE JR.
(4) 230, Clinton, MS

5—NIC NEMETH
(9) 210, Cleveland, OH

6—MIKE MONDO
(5) 229, Long Island, NY

7—MATT SYDEL
(–) 177, St. Louis, MO

8—STEVE LEWINGTON
(8) 225, Wokingham, England

9—BILLY KIDMAN
(7) 195, Allentown, PA

10—AFA JR.
(3) 255, Samoa

JAPAN

1—SHINSUKE NAKAMURA
(1) 229, Mineyama, Japan
IWGP champion

2—KENSUKE SASAKI
(3) 251, Tokyo, Japan
All Japan Triple Crown champion

3—TAKESHI MORISHIMA
(10) 297, Tokyo, Japan
GHC champion

4—CIMA
(8) 176, Sakai City, Japan
Open the Dream Gate champion

5—MINORU SUZUKI
(5) 220, Yokohama, Japan

6—MITSUHARU MISAWA
(2) 228, Ashikaga, Japan

7—KOHEI SUWAMA
(–) 227, Ogaki, Japan

8—KENTA
(–) 176, Saitama, Japan

9—OSAMU NISHIMURA
(–) 235, Tokyo, Japan

10—SATOSHI KOJIMA
(–) 223, Tokyo, Japan

MEXICO

1—JUDAS MESIAS
(4) 245, Bayamon, Puerto Rico

2—CIBERNETICO
(–) 230, Mexico City, Mexico

3—LIZMARK JR.
(6) 262, Acapulco, Mexico

4—MISTICO
(8) 177, Mexico City, Mexico

5—ULTIMO GUERRERO
(1) 210, Gomez Palacio, Mexico

6—ATLANTIS
(5) 180, Guadalajara, Mexico

7—HECTOR GARZA
(9) 220, Monterrey, Mexico

8—JUVENTUD GUERRERA
(–) 165, Mexico City, Mexico

9—ALAN STONE
(–) 194, Mexico City, Mexico

10—DR. WAGNER JR.
(2) 215, Mexico City, Mexico

REMEMBER HER?

In December 2000, a Canadian nutrition major from Ryerson University made her wrestling debut for Apocalypse Wrestling Federation under a mask as "La Felina." After grooming herself in Apocalypse, and seeing her early WWE success amount to nothing, Gail Kim signed with TNA and patiently waited for a women's division to form around her. The former "La Felina" is directly responsible for all the success the Knockout division enjoys today.